



This is a digital copy of a book that was preserved for generations on library shelves before it was carefully scanned by Google as part of a project to make the world's books discoverable online.

It has survived long enough for the copyright to expire and the book to enter the public domain. A public domain book is one that was never subject to copyright or whose legal copyright term has expired. Whether a book is in the public domain may vary country to country. Public domain books are our gateways to the past, representing a wealth of history, culture and knowledge that's often difficult to discover.

Marks, notations and other marginalia present in the original volume will appear in this file - a reminder of this book's long journey from the publisher to a library and finally to you.

Usage guidelines

Google is proud to partner with libraries to digitize public domain materials and make them widely accessible. Public domain books belong to the public and we are merely their custodians. Nevertheless, this work is expensive, so in order to keep providing this resource, we have taken steps to prevent abuse by commercial parties, including placing technical restrictions on automated querying.

We also ask that you:

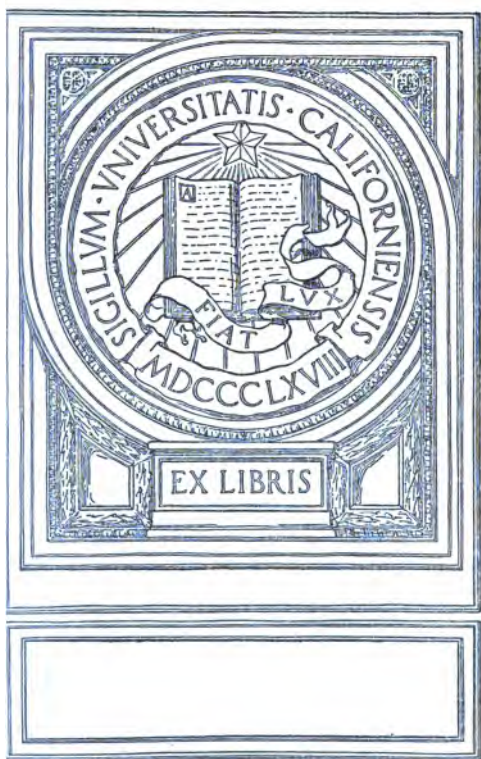
- + *Make non-commercial use of the files* We designed Google Book Search for use by individuals, and we request that you use these files for personal, non-commercial purposes.
- + *Refrain from automated querying* Do not send automated queries of any sort to Google's system: If you are conducting research on machine translation, optical character recognition or other areas where access to a large amount of text is helpful, please contact us. We encourage the use of public domain materials for these purposes and may be able to help.
- + *Maintain attribution* The Google "watermark" you see on each file is essential for informing people about this project and helping them find additional materials through Google Book Search. Please do not remove it.
- + *Keep it legal* Whatever your use, remember that you are responsible for ensuring that what you are doing is legal. Do not assume that just because we believe a book is in the public domain for users in the United States, that the work is also in the public domain for users in other countries. Whether a book is still in copyright varies from country to country, and we can't offer guidance on whether any specific use of any specific book is allowed. Please do not assume that a book's appearance in Google Book Search means it can be used in any manner anywhere in the world. Copyright infringement liability can be quite severe.

About Google Book Search

Google's mission is to organize the world's information and to make it universally accessible and useful. Google Book Search helps readers discover the world's books while helping authors and publishers reach new audiences. You can search through the full text of this book on the web at <http://books.google.com/>

THE
DESERT
AND
Mrs. AJAX
~

EDWARD
MOFFAT



THE

DESERT AND MRS. AJAX





—TWISTED ABOUT AND STRUCK OUT WITH ALL HER FORCE

The Desert and Mrs. Ajax

By

EDWARD MOFFAT

Illustrated

NEW YORK

MOFFAT, YARD AND COMPANY

1914

**COPYRIGHT, 1914, BY
MOFFAT, YARD AND COMPANY
NEW YORK**

ALL RIGHTS RESERVED

Published March, 1914

961
M6952
d.c

TO
MY MOTHER

M532957



ILLUSTRATIONS

—Twisted About and Struck Out with All Her Force	<i>Frontispiece</i>
“Steer Him More Port, Altamont” . .	FACING PAGE 38
“Bishop Sorensen from Bull Valley Stake”	178

CHAPTER I

DICK HOLLY was nearly home. Marooned on the sun-bleached platform of Ami flag station amid an assortment of glaringly new pigskin bags, he was impatiently kicking his heels against the side of his trunk and waiting for yesterday's unappreciated comforts to depart.

Without a sign of regret on his bronzed face, he saw them roll away—damask and silver, cut glass and genial African—with all their crowding memories of six months in the East, of strange scenes of pomp and glitter and tumultuous endeavor—all dwindling down into the shining plain and fading at last into a mere smudge of smoke against the horizon.

Before him lay—the Desert. Between the shifting slopes of the sand hills he saw it in all its hypnotizing vastness, glittering and twinkling under a summer's sun. A gray-ash sea of sage billowed up from its softer stretches and broke around the whitened platform under his feet, but elsewhere it rolled away, unrelieved and unmeas-

2 THE DESERT AND MRS. AJAX

ured, into distant banks of haze where a grotesque armed joshua-palm lurched to and fro in the heat, or where it curled, wave-like, around islanded buttes with black, jutting scarps. Here and there dry lake beds, golden yellow, glittered in the smoky distance, glaring up at the crackling blue vault like eye-holes in a skull, while across their hot floors bands of dust-dervishes came spinning in fantastic pirouette. Whirling erratically on unseen pivots and scudding madly hither and yon they dissolved magically every moment in mid-air, only to rise again as quickly in spasmodic, agitated spirals. And over and through it all, from some unknown bourne, came a keen, dry wind which blew unceasingly.

"You can't beat it!" the traveler murmured. "*This* is the real thing. A hundred and fifty miles of just plain distance. Now, that's what I call *scenery!*"

Yet there was more to see, for far across the desert, high above the sand bluffs banded red and yellow like some mammoth layer cake, lay his mountains, rimming the cup with a saw-toothed edge. Waterless, lifeless, gaunt, and grim, barely garmented, in fact, with decent earth, the stark spines ran down to the bone-dry plain like the

THE DESERT AND MRS. AJAX 3

gnarled fingers of some giant hand, searing the eye with their ghastly ugliness.

The tall traveler tugged at his mustache in silent satisfaction. Yes,—it was all there—all of that bright, barren, unlovely land he loved, just as it had lived, well remembered and aching, in the back of his head for a long half year. And if, with the sense of heat and light and infinite distance, he felt once more the lifelong thrill of freedom, it was because he had come back at last to his own—back home.

Dick Holly had gone East to sell a mine—and he had sold it. For thirty hard years he had fought those same bleak ranges and windswept plains, prospecting, farming, milling, and mining, and now at forty-two the man had won and all his troubles were behind him. All were gone, the years of poverty, hardships, privations, the days of discontent—everything except the occasional loneliness of a life too uncertain for marriage.

He turned away from the desert and, musingly, poked at his baggage with his toe. Fifty miles away over there behind the hot hills at Bullionfield men were busy tramming ore in a mine which he, and another man's engineers, knew had established him for life, yet there was work to be done in Ami

4 THE DESERT AND MRS. AJAX

before he set out on the homeward lap and the golden levels of the "Yellow Dog" must wait. Voices were calling from the keen-aired slopes of the Mormons, purpling in the haze, and the sweet scent of his orchards over Moab way was in his nostrils, yet to-day he would tarry awhile in Ami and hear what was to be heard. His deal with Osgood Warder in Philadelphia had been almost ruined at the last moment—and some unknown enemy in Moab or Bullionfield had done it.

Across the road, in what little remained of the once notorious "head-end" camp of Ami, Holly's roving eye caught sight of its only sign of life. "Ami is surely a sincere sleeper," he meditated. "Old Flatwheel Mullen, behind 'The Silver State' bar, is the only one awake. He's my man, I reckon, but he'll sure be crazy to hear about New York—I must think up some awful capers."

But, much to Holly's disappointment, "The Silver State" proved nearly as lifeless as the desert outside. A few resigned-looking Mormon freighters, in patched, blue overalls, dozed, disheveled and unshorn, among the droning flies—in the rear an Eastern consumptive poked the pool balls listlessly about. The ancient fame of Ami had with-

ered as doth the winter leaf. Ami was indubitably dead—and Holly said so.

"Doghouse is dead, too," Flatwheel retorted, from a strategic position behind the bar. "I knew the rush wouldn't last. Swearing-Johnny Murdock threw up his lease on 'The National Mint' and came back last night. He said he might have been just a foot short of a million dollars, but to his positive knowledge he was more than forty miles from a drink."

"No water, I—er—presume."

"No whisky," corrected Flatwheel, then reddened under the other's amused eye. "You can't make a new gold camp on this desert with water at fifteen dollars a barrel. Or whisky, either," he sighed. "But how about——"

"Is that all your news, old timer? About half of Broadway thinks Nevada is one of our 'islands.' What else is strange in these parts?"

"Ickelheimer went *loco* yesterday. Run clean out of celluloids up to the store just when there's a dance and a new school-marm down to Dutch Flat. But what did you think——"

"Young or old?"

"Boiled about four minutes," answered Flatwheel, and scored at last. "Of course, you didn't

6 THE DESERT AND MRS. AJAX

miss it in those New York papers how Cal Wilson was finally obliged to shoot up Shorty Baker?"

"Shorty always *was* a careless locator," the tall man murmured guardedly, behind his tawny mustache. "Jumping claims again, I suppose?"

In answer the ancient Flatwheel plucked the cigar from between his teeth and smote upon the bar.

"*No*," he roared. "*Not* jumping. He was circulating low statements about Cal's ore. That's just where Shorty snarled his rope—what I said to him when they brought him in here and spoiled my pool table for me—the last words Shorty Baker ever heard. 'Shorty,' said I. 'Plays like you made won't *go* in Nevada. Your judgment's horrible.'"

Holly straightened up from his ease against the bar and unsheathed a searching gray eye.

"Is that *all*, Tom? Isn't there something else?"

The old man caught the look and put away his whims.

"There's *two* things that's happened," he answered in lower tones. "The first is that a man named Macklin, who owns the Atlas Mine that side-lines you over at Bullionfield, was in town yes-

terday, stating that you were in for a lawsuit. That old fool of a George Buckner from Moab had him in tow and when they'd licked they were right noisy about what Macklin could do to your property if he liked."

The big man, with the untroubled level eyes, only shook his head.

"He *guesses* we're working the extension of his vein in the Yellow Dog, but as he's never done any work on his claim to show how the ore lies, he'll have hard work to prove it. But I'm someways surprised at old George Buckner," and Holly looked puzzled. "Just before we closed the deal back East, my people told me they'd had threatening letters from parties out here, but had concluded to take a chance and go ahead. If that was really some of Buckner's work—I don't think Macklin, himself, is smart enough." Holly tilted his felt hat over his eyes with the same huge hand that caressed the back of his head, and yawned and stared thoughtfully at nothing. "Poor Uncle Georgie," he said at last. "Made a swing and broke his pick. Ever since he sold me the Yellow Dog for the price of an abandoned well he's been hating himself worse than a Piute. If old Georgie only knew what forty-nine per cent. of that mine

8 THE DESERT AND MRS. AJAX

brought in to me he'd be an early bird at locating claims for several years to come. But what's the other thing?"

"It's this," was Flatwheel's sober answer. "*They've found Dan Drew!*"

"*What?*" shouted Holly. "Dan Drew went north more than three years ago."

"Dan Drew *never* went north," refuted old Tom, with burning eyes. "Dan Drew never got farther away than ten miles from your own ranch. They found Dan Drew, *with his back shot full of holes*, covered up in a sand hill in the Devil's Playground!"

The ranchman puckered up his lips in a noiseless whistle. Dan Drew alive, he only remembered as a wandering prospector and one-time owner of the Atlas claim, but Dan Drew dead—and shot in the back—was another matter. Searching his memory for reasons why he should ever have believed that Drew, with the unappeasable claim hunger of the prospector, had gone north with his burros into Idaho, he found little that was tangible. Likewise, when he experimented on some connection between Drew and old Joe Macklin, the shiftless bar-room miner of Bullionfield, he made even less headway. And yet his instinct told him

that these things were very surely about to involve his own interests. Macklin and the Atlas—Buckner, the “jack-Mormon” storekeeper from Moab—and poor, forgotten Dan Drew—around these suddenly connected four his mind busied itself in a swift attack, searching for the loose ends of the knot.

“Probably Macklin’s an old side-kicker of yours,” the facetious Flatwheel remarked, “but he’s the first man *I* ever see with his picture tattooed on his arm. That’s what,” he said, as he concocted something in a bar glass. “A side-winder with its fangs out, just jumping from the coil.”

“*Where? What? How’s that?*” asked Holly, with a start.

“On his arm, I ree-pect. Don’t shy your drink, *compadre*. It’s a real old ‘Silverado Settler’ I’ve been mixing for you ever since I saw you escaping from that brunette gentleman on the train.”

“It *looks* like a ‘settler,’” and Holly muddled it doubtfully with a spoon. “*What kind of a mark——*”

“Who all did you see back East?” interrupted Flatwheel, determined to be thwarted no longer.

“See?” responded Holly vaguely, while his

10 THE DESERT AND MRS. AJAX

mind strained itself across a gap nearly thirty years wide. "Oh, I saw a crew of genial old pirates at their clubs and some high-haired Willie-boys eating cigarettes with their meals. One of them asked how far a man would have to walk to find a claim. They have some sweet ideas about a mine."

Holly turned away and buttoned up his duster. A peculiarly fitting revenge on Buckner of Moab had occurred to him at just that moment and, furthermore, he wanted to do some thinking about the man with the tattoo mark on his arm. Altogether, as he figured it, there would be just about time enough to set his revenge in motion and then he had better jog along home. "Yes," he meditated, with a grim chuckle, "I reckon that by this time to-morrow *home* will be about the safest little spot on the whole Moab desert for *me*." Quickly inventorying the human contents of "The Silver State" and finding no worthy tool at hand to carry out his Machiavellian designs, he left his drink untasted and strode in the direction of the door.

Flatwheel, in dismay, saw his long sought opportunity slipping away before his very eyes. With the departure of the big man his senile dreams of

the Great White Way would forever lack confirmation.

"Don't be in such a tearing hurry, Dick," he yelled. "Can't you even tell a fellow what you think of New York?"

The door reopened and a cloud of tobacco smoke puffed in.

"It looks like a permanent camp."

The sandy bed of "Twenty Mile Canyon" was only a faintly luminous streak of gray next morning when Holly's bays clinked down its winding course and whirled him out on the Moab desert. But, early as it was, "The Great Buckner Gold Strike of 1907" was ready for the tablets of History, for in the piñon-dotted confines of the canyon which the amused traveler was rapidly leaving behind him a knot of highly suspicious persons were gathered around a gray-bearded, discomfited old man. This gentleman was responding to verbal and physical proddings by frequent exhibitions of some snow-white quartz on which the gold lay in preposterous yellow knobs, much as if it had been roughly daubed with butter. He was further defending his difficult position by parrot-like repetitions of some fragmentary information

gleaned from an unknown, mysterious messenger of the night before.

"Suppose we sort of cast an eye on that valible sample of your bonanza, George," they said, and forthwith roughly took it from him.

One look was enough, and a roar went up to the bright Nevada morning. "*California gold!*" they shouted. "'Oleo' like that don't grow in Nevada dirt!"

"But I'm tellin' you, Nevada don't follow no geologic probabilities, gents," protested the suspected one. "This yere ore, like as not, was put in this canyon by One who knows a dern sight more 'bout rocks than you nor me!"

"Then we reckon that's Dick Holly. We never saw that bay team travel so fast *away* from a gold strike before." Whereupon half a hundred disappointed men eyed each other sheepishly for a moment and then threw back their heads and exploded in laughter.

"Butter-gold and snow-quartz in the heart of the malapai," they guffawed, and left him for their teams tethered under the piñons. "If Professor Buckner wants to ketch one of them little geologic probabilities running around off the Mother Lode he'd better trail that side-bar buggy." And one

after another, still exploding with laughter, the gold-seekers turned their horses homewards, already shaping up the story for future generations.

Meanwhile, it promised to be a long, hot ride to where Moab showed in a small, dark spot across the plain, and when the bay team had settled down to their tireless trot, Dick Holly was sitting bent loosely forward, his soft hat pulled down level with his eyebrows, his rein hand hanging listlessly across his knee. In the interval since yesterday a small matter of identification had been clearing itself up.

He was sitting again on the feed-sack cushion of a rocking freighter, while around him the same thirsty plain stretched away into the smoky distance. The same crisp "cla-a-a" rose up from the wheels cleaving the sand of the draws and he looked up, as now, to a blinding sky or down to the powdery dust streaming off the tires. Wedged in between two others, a boy sat with his palms pressed tight together between his knees, employing his active mind throughout the long day as best he could. Sometimes he looked up to a patient woman in sleazy black whose sad eyes seemed to look only towards California, and sometimes he stared at a vague-faced figure whose boot was curled around the brake rod, but always his in-

14 THE DESERT AND MRS. AJAX

quisitive glances came back to the arms half bared above the driving cuffs. As if it were only yesterday, Dick Holly could see those bright markings on the flat of the forearm. He could even remember how quickly the boy had recognized the snake he knew so well, with its triangular head and its black, venom-tipped tongue thrust forward in the strike. It was all too keenly remembered for mistakes to creep in now, and the man's lips tightened as he tried to shake it off and put his mind on what was to come out of the discovery. But, try as he would, sharp fragments of the tragedy kept coming back.

In their rear, he saw the trail-wagon with its scant load of household goods balking and bumping across the yellow swales. In front, the last four of the old ranch horses plodded away from what was now another man's home towards the lush valleys of a kinder State. He saw the weekend camp at Hot Creek again and, under the paling stars, the vague-faced man hitching up a team to the lead wagon for an all-day trip for "feed." But neither on that day, nor on the next did the wagon and horses come back, and with the close of the third day the boy knew as well as the white-faced mother, searching through

their possessions for a precious wallet, that now there was to be no California for them.

The boy's arm was around his mother's neck now. He was facing the gaunt mountains and the untilled plain with a certain stout defiance; aye, and frowning up at the blinding sky itself. "Now, don't you go to feelin' bad, Ma. We're goin' to stick it out right yere. I guess, now, this yere Gawd, *He* ain't goin' to be so terrible down on us just 'cause we gotta live in Nevada! *Some* folks says *He—helps!*"

Holly woke up and thrust his hat back from his eyes. "Oh-hum," he said with a half laugh. "Poor little cuss. *He* didn't mean anything by it."

By this time the road from Moab presented a curious sight, for the troop of fevered gold-seekers that Holly had already met was only a corporal's, guard to those who now came on. And as the minutes flew and wagons and horsemen coursed steadily by, with always a jovial word for the exile escaped from the effete East, Holly's jaw dropped lower and lower. "Who could have figured they'd be so restless?" he murmured, conscience-stricken by the alarming results of his practical joke. "All *I'd* hoped for was a little private fun

16 THE DESERT AND MRS. AJAX

for George, but hanged if he didn't put the whole county on wheels."

Moab's poplars came in sight, streaming up straight and slim. Holly could see far down the arch of cottonwoods which drank each side in little brooks gurgling against their roots, but he looked in vain for signs of life. Only a few blue wisps of smoke appeared, curling up from the farmhouse kitchens and, on the fringe of the town, a small cloud of dust. The latter was caused by a foot passenger approaching at a remarkable rate of speed.

He was a fat, excessively pink-faced man who wore a pink shirt and the remains of a gorgeously striped collar of the same æsthetic hue. Occupying the mathematical center of the road, he was breathlessly maintaining a gait somewhere between a trot and a waddle. On the face of things, he appeared to be agitated. Behind him, what was evidently a pursuing figure had lately taken form, which fact, as he glanced apprehensively over his shoulder, seemed to increase both his agitation and his speed.

"Am I on my way to the dee-po?" yelled the pink man as he puffed by.

"You are," the puzzled ranchman replied.
"But where's the bear?"

The perspiring one turned a fear-blanced countenance and opened his mouth as if to reply. Then he wisely closed it again, as if every breath were precious. With a sweep of his hand he only gestured dramatically at the impending doom, and scudded fatly away.

CHAPTER II

THE pursuer was a woman. Large of frame and red-faced, wilted as her quarry had been, she was, if anything, even more exhausted. As she drew near to Holly her courageously persistent run slowed down to a walk and presently, after a despairing look at the fast vanishing victim, she gave up completely and sat down disconsolately in the middle of the road.

The wondering ranchman peered at her over his horses' heads. "How do you do, ma'am?" he remarked gently.

"Thanking you kindly—*very* badly," replied the woman, without deigning to look up. After which she proceeded to pull the pins viciously out of a mass of disheveled hair and wind it into a hard, turban-like knob on the top of her head.

"I trust you will pardon this seeming indisposition," was her ultimate remark, "but the fact is I'm so terribly played out I—just—can't—*move*."

"It's a real nice day," said the ranchman genially. "I guess there's time for 'most every-

thing. What seems to be the chief trouble, ma'am?"

The unknown sighed dolefully. "*That*," she announced, and pointed a finger of withering scorn down the road, "*that* was all that is left of the celebrated G. Edward Pilkington!" She strained her eyes after the dwindling dust cloud and her voice began to quaver suspiciously. Presently it broke forth in a despairing wail which mounted into tragedy.

"And he has *runned* away!"

The ranchman was still puzzled. "I—I reckon that's all true, ma'am."

"Well," remarked the woman resignedly, "I guess there ain't one bit's use to complain. He's certainly good-and-gone, *now*. And, landsakes—I I'm so darned flustered I might not know just how to address him even if I did catch up with him. Did he mention that he might return?"

"I think he forgot," Holly answered, pondering over the forlorn figure in the dust. "He looked in such a hurry."

"Well, then," the woman gulped, "I guess I'll just get right in with you and ride back to town. There's nothing more I can do."

"You're right welcome, ma'am," Holly bowed.

20 THE DESERT AND MRS. AJAX

"But just one minute, please. My off horse has picked up a stone."

The woman rose at once from the ground and looked interested. She was a stoutly made person of middle age, with firm though pleasant features and remarkably strong black eyes. She wore a gray, whipcord skirt of uncertain years but very certain spots, and her neck and arms, which Holly could not help thinking extraordinarily large, stretched a close-fitting green jersey to its utmost capacity. As she drew nearer to the ranchman, across her ample bosom, in the major tints of a California sunset, appeared the emblazoned words, "Pilkington's Circus."

"Which foot did you say?" she queried brightly. "I'm mighty tender-hearted about animals—I guess it's real lucky I'm here. Perhaps if I lift him up you can get it out," and without waiting for assent she began to suit her action to her words. "He looks as if he'd weigh about eleven hundred," was her only remark as she approached with a business-like air and selected a point of attack. Planting her feet firmly on the ground and grasping the horse by the front quarters with a ferocious grip that made her fingers sink almost out of sight in the wrinkling coat, she

took a long breath and then, with a prodigious heave, lifted the animal clear of the ground. "You'll have to hurry some," she panted, as she held a struggling leg imprisoned under each arm. "I guess he don't like it."

"He—he's so used to the ground, ma'am," Holly murmured, searching hastily for the stone. "But perhaps it would be all right for you to get in now."

The woman lowered the animal carefully to the roadway and, stretching her arms above her head, proceeded to go through a short course in calisthenics remarkable alike for velocity and power.

"*There,*" she exclaimed, with explosive relief. "I feel a heap sight better. I had to do something like that or—just—*bust!*"

As they drove down the road towards silent Moab, Holly observed his passenger with an appreciative eye. Now that the enlivening incident was over, she had lapsed into moody dejection, which involved a blank stare at the dash-board and occasional gusty sighs. In view of the dynamic qualities she seemed to possess, so long a silence stirred his curiosity, and he decided to verge upon the personal.

"Of course, we haven't been legally and legiti-

22 THE DESERT AND MRS. AJAX

mately introduced," he said, "but I judge it would be perfectly all right for you to tell your name."

"No trouble," the woman assented instantly, and came out of her trance with a cheery smile. "I'm MRS. AJAX, Champion Strong Woman, Weight-Lifter, and Dental Demonstrator of the United States, Cuba, and the Philippines. I guess you've heard of *me* before. When I'm feeling peart I can lift five hundred pounds just with my teeth. But I'm right poorly now."

"*Nerves*, I reckon," was the startled suggestion.

"The trouble originates in the three squares per day—we *don't* get 'em," was the succinct reply. "But, Land-o'-Goodness! I'm an imported Circassian Beauty alongside of the scarecrows down to the tent. Brothers Blondelli are so hungry they bark when they see meat, and Cobrita, the Snake Lady, is *that* thin you can hardly talk behind her back. Most all the horses has died lately, and the Trick Dogs are feeling mean. And yesterday the Wild Man from Java *ate the Trained Pig and went back to the Reservation!*"

With this last horrid disclosure, the Strong Woman's voice began to flutter uncertainly. "We've stuck to it pretty well—my husband and

I and a few others—but now the last card's out of the box. We had it all figured out to show to-day, and maybe *eat* because the place looked so good, but right spang in the middle of the night the whole town went stark, staring crazy and ran away out on the desert. When G. Edward heard about *that* I guess it was the last straw, 'cause he just grabbed the cash-box and absquandered the *whole thing!* ”

“ *Thousands*—I guess! ”

“ Twenty dollars, s-s-s-sixty-s-s-seven,” sobbed Mrs. Ajax, in a storm of tears. “ And I bet I could eat it *all* in custard pie! ”

Although meditation on the far-reaching effects of the Mother Lode Rock ought to have occupied Holly's thoughts at this moment insatiable curiosity held his conscience in torpid leash.

“ You don't mean you were a *circus*, ma'am? Not a *real* one—with rings and trapezes—and a lady hoop-diver with charlotte roosh skirts—and——”

“ And a band and a Katzenjammer Family and peanuts and—and—*everything*,” gulped Mrs. Ajax through her tears. “ But it's all in the discard now, Dearie. This mining country we heard so much about's so poor it takes *two* pee-wee

24 THE DESERT AND MRS. AJAX

birds to sing *one* song," with which caustic remark the Strong Woman dried her tears and subsided into intermittent hiccoughs of a startling violence.

Holly smiled and pondered. The last time *he'd* seen a circus he'd ridden the rods to Salt Lake City and crawled, boy-like, under the canvas, with something interesting scheduled to happen presently at both ends. "Night after night, if you'll remember, you've laid out on the desert just a-moaning for that little old clown again. And the lady on the spangly horse! And the *chariot race!*"

"Mrs. Ajax," said he abruptly. "Your circus can have a paying audience of *one*, if it wants it. You know the trail—go to it. Can you lift *six* hundred if you eat meat?"

"Don't talk so loud," the woman whispered hoarsely, as she gathered up the reins. "Are you an *angel?*"

"It wouldn't be hard to arrange," Holly smiled. "Old Nick, himself, could be elected one in this State. Nevada likes to be 'broad.'"

The Strong Woman began to consider him with a strongly favorable look in her shrewd black eyes.

"You could have *my* vote," she said.

As they drove down the shaded street into Moab, Holly's passenger heaved a sigh of satisfaction. "We haven't got far to go now," was the cheerful announcement, "and a good thing, too. I guess breakfast is feeling mighty lonesome. Git up, horsey."

The ranchman heard no more than the first few words. His eyes were on the billowing canvas, the streaming pennants of thirty years gone by. All alert, his slumbering senses woke again to the acrid smell of peanuts and the well-remembered, fresh, rank odor of trampled grass. Once more there rang in his ears the hoarse cries of the barker pleading with the crowd, while out of the dim and distant past the majestic bulk of The Fat Lady on the Side-Show platform loomed up against the sky.

Down the silent street drove the Strong Woman, while the ranchman stared fondly ahead, waiting for some corner to be turned and disclose the longed-for sight in all its inspiring beauty.

"Here we be," the Strong Woman announced abruptly, and bringing the team to a stop she wound the reins around the whip-stock and prepared to disembark.

26 THE DESERT AND MRS. AJAX

Holly stared about and his face fell.

"But where's the Circus?" he queried hollowly.

"Right here," responded Mrs. Ajax definitely. "Time to get out now, Dearie."

In the middle of the road in front of them a girl was seated on a brass-bound trunk. She was a small, blonde person, wearing a flimsy, yellow dress with old-fashioned puffed sleeves. Long, black gloves covered her arms, and high-heeled slippers adorned her feet. Surmounting the yellow hair, she wore an amazingly large black hat which, from its precarious clings on the side of her head, drooped its broken plumes dejectedly over one ear. In fairer times the girl's face would have been pretty, in a soft, childish way, but just now it looked drawn and rather white. With her chin buried in her hands she was staring listlessly at a half-dozen white dogs who lay disposed around her feet in various attitudes of sleep.

"Hello, there, Cobrita dear!" called Mrs. Ajax, backing out from between the buggy wheels. "Where's all the talent got to? Where in the world's my husband? What's Clarice Belvawney doing, I'd like to know—leaving you here all alone? Where's Angelo—and Alberto? I didn't

catch him, Cobrita—and I ran—just—*all—I—could.*”

The little blonde person slid down from the trunk and dabbed her handkerchief forlornly at her eyes.

“I’m awful glad you’re back, Imogene,” she said, “but I’m afraid I don’t know just *where* they are—I’ve been crying and feeding the dogs ever since you left. Clarice said *something* about trying to get up a French Class—she says it worked all right at Piute Junction, once—and Brothers Blondelli went away to look up a man who has some cattle, but nobody knows if they’re going to kill, or only punch. Your husband stayed around for a while playing ‘The Star Spangled Banner’ on his flute to sort of help things out, but I cried all the time and the dogs whined so that he hunted up the drum with the cymbal attachment and went away. I heard a woman saying ‘good-by’ or something to him a while back and I don’t believe he’s made one cent. But they’ll all get something to do—I don’t stand much chance myself. My snakes aren’t due to wake up till a week from Tuesday, and I haven’t a single other thing but the fuzzy dogs and Fancy Dancing.” Whereupon the little Snake Lady hid her face in two thin hands,

28 THE DESERT AND MRS. AJAX

unmindful of broken seams in the long, black gloves, and began to cry quietly but very miserably to herself.

"There, there, now," soothed Mrs. Ajax, as she drew the tangle of yellow hair against her bosom and patted the pinched face. "It will all blow over soon. I guess *all* these Westerners ain't hard-hearted. Have you had your breakfast, Petty?"

"Belvawney and I had an egg-ug-ug," sobbed Cobrita. "But she made me eat her ha-ha-half."

Deep in thought the author of the catastrophe sat silent in his buggy. A few yards away a half-dozen battle-scarred circus wagons stood marooned in a vacant field. Long usage had dulled their once effulgent tints, and a desert sun had blistered their vivid panoramas for idle hands to flick away. Here and there, in indescribable chaos, lay trunks with forced locks and broken hinges, boxes, poles, stakes, and snarls of rope. Nearby a depressing collection of mildewed tents strewed a half-acre of ground, as if dropped from some itinerant balloon. A solitary, dispirited horse, browsing destructively among the scattered chattels, lifted a crestless neck and stared gauntly at the man in the buggy. The vociferous appeal of its ribs made his heart ache.

In fact, the only relieving feature in the whole distressing scene was a small, mouse-colored, mud-encrusted elephant, chained by one hind foot to a stake. The elephant had been swaying itself hypnotically from side to side and curling and uncurling the tip of its trunk. As Holly looked, it, too, succumbed to the general despondency, for presently it kneeled down with several loud groans and rolled over on its back.

And this, in its entirety, was what now remained of Pilkington's Celebrated Inter-Continental and Trans-Oceanic Hippodrome. The Galaxy of Glittering Gayeties—The Concatenated Bouquet of Beautiful Bewilderments—with their Stupendous, Startling, and Sight Satiating Singularities had retreated to the last ditch—had fought their last fight—had petered out.

In vain Holly cast about for brass-lunged canvassmen; there were none. Neither were there "drapers"; for they had vanished away. Nor clowns, nor bandsmen. Nor cooks, flunkys, nor teamsters. Gone! All gone! Gone in the imperceptible flicker of an eyelid at the first inkling of the pink man's retrogression! Gone in one mad, tearing rush for Fame and Fortune! For *Gold!* And *Twenty Mile!*

30 THE DESERT AND MRS. AJAX

Bravely confronting the two women, Holly told the story of the gold strike with soulful gestures.

"But don't feel mean about not appreciating what a fine joke it was on *him*," he added, "nor about your missing your calculations. No fellow could expect you to figure beforehand on a crazy gold strike and a real absquandering all in the same day. That would be too much for *any* lady."

Then the ranchman's eyes kindled with the fire of a great idea. "Ladies—and friends," he said. "From now on, please consider yourselves in my hands—perfectly safe. I'll have to leave you for a while or so, but I'll be back. In the meantime, please corral all the Pilkington mavericks and load your trunks on two of the wagons. At one o'clock you will all be at my ranch down the valley. At one-thirty you will *eat!*"

With this golden promise on his lips Holly turned away and descended on the corrals and barns of Moab even as the Assyrian came down on the fold. Once, when he looked back, he saw Cobrita dutifully gathering her white dogs together while, in the distance, Imogene was striding swiftly towards a farmhouse from whose purlieus issued the melting notes of a flute, mingled with some insistent remarks in a woman's voice. Pres-

ently, with a curious abruptness, the remarks ceased.

The human selvage of Pilkington's Inter-Continental and Trans-Oceanic drifted slowly back from its quests and lent itself to roping trunks, though not without a few cynical doubts.

"Snakes and *all*, Imogene?" called Cobrita, raising a flushed face from the depths of a large green box with ventilating screens set in its sides. "He didn't exactly *say*, you know."

"*Everything goes*," responded the grimly reliant Strong Woman. "*I know* these big-hearted Westerners. He'd feel all broke up if you left out just one little yellow rattler. Take a tip from Clarice—she's got her tights and trapeze done up in her shawl-strap right now. You won't catch *that* young lady out on a desert without means of support. And, land-sakes!" she sighed. "Nobody knows just what *will* turn up. All *I* know is we're going somewheres in wagons, and at one-*thirty*, the man says——"

With a hollow chant the circus finished the sentence.

"At one-*thirty*—we *eat*!"

Troubles in this vale of tears, however, are oftener transferred than entirely destroyed, as

32 THE DESERT AND MRS. AJAX

Holly was discovering as he herded his four-footed finds circus-wards. "The puzzle is, how to make a 'pair' out of a work-horse with a splint and a one-eyed mule and still preserve your equinimity," he muttered, in huge disgust. "I guess I'll let the Italians steer these prizes and tow the elephant behind. These four amusing little range ponies can go in the 'six' with me." And although the range ponies at first demurred to this arrangement they soon found themselves harnessed to the larger of the two wagons, whose rear wheels were presently chained to a tree.

The ranchman removed his hat and mopped his brow. The psychological moment had arrived. Little by little the semicircle of trustful Pilkingtons was drawing nearer, seeming to pivot about the stalwart form of Mrs. Ajax, whose strong eyes rested on the ranchman with a certain shrewd reliance. On either side of the Strong Woman a clean-limbed, well-made man stood at rest in the easy pose of the acrobat,—clear-eyed and quiet, but thoroughly alert. Next to the younger Italian, with her big hat nodding and her French heels clicked together as if on dress parade, Cobrita whispered softly, an unwinking, pink-nosed dog under each arm.

Holly's eye ran swiftly along the line and stopped short. "*Mister Ajax*," he breathed, with an internal convulsion.

With his flute-case clasped tightly to his breast, the other half of the Ajax family was standing in trance-like quiescence, his mild and colorless eyes untroubled by either the strenuous past or the pregnant future. Beneath the gray stubble of his chin, the end of a celluloid collar swung, joyously unfettered, while his thin, straw-colored hair, smoothed slickly down on one side of his head, rose on the other side in distressing tufts. Very much undersized, entirely indeterminate as a factor in anything, the little man seemed all bones, and angles, and shabby clothes.

"One, two, three, four, *five*," Holly counted. "And the dark-eyed, quiet girl, who's been watching me, must be Clarice."

"Friends," said the ranchman, "it's all my fault—I *did it*. Heretofore I've bought and paid for all the fun I wanted, sometimes by the running foot but mostly by the quart, and the first attempt to have a little private excitement at some other man's expense has turned out to be the failure I always knew it would be. Now, if I can help you out by asking you to visit me down at my ranch

34 THE DESERT AND MRS. AJAX

for as long as you want to stay it will be the least I can do." He paused and surveyed the group with alternate hope and fear.

"If you'll come I'll be tickled to death. What's the vote?"

With perfect unanimity the circus advanced, looked him fervently in the eye, and gripped his hand.

"'Tis a fine fellow ye are," Alberto announced in his native Italian. "If ye've a few horses below there I'll be earning me salt as sure as me name's Michael Scanlan."

"I'm wid youse, Pal," breathed Angelo. "I thought to-day it 'ud be 'back to the shops' fer Harry Doogan."

Holly spared them a pleased moment. "I'm awful glad you're white," he murmured. "There wasn't a single foot of spaghetti in Moab. And now we're all ready but the Chinaman!"

"The *what?*" shrieked Imogene, from the top of the wagon.

"The cook, ma'am," Holly answered uncertainly. "At least he claimed he'd been a cook, back in China."

"Don't let me get my hands on any Chinaman," snorted Imogene. "I didn't come out here on a

wild desert to have my complexion ruined. CLARICE! *Have you got your bundle?*"

"Slip the chain when you're mad," Holly said to the younger acrobat, and swung himself up to his seat and combed out his reins.

"WOW!" yelled Signor Doogan Blondelli, and gained the tail-board with a dexterous leap. The wagon, suddenly released, shot forward with a bound.

Once out on the broad, level road which ran south through the valley from Moab the ranchman's attention was drawn to the quiet, dark-eyed girl who had taken a seat on the box beside him. He had been somewhat conscious of her eyes during the rush from the field to the road, although she had held her difficult position with a suppleness of body both unobtrusive and practical, but now that he could turn his thoughts to other things besides the range ponies, she looked away and all that he could see was the smooth whiteness of her neck under a mass of fresh, brown hair.

His first impression was that all about her was redolent with cleanliness—even the forlorn, faded dress could not prevent that—and when at last she turned her head, the sweet fullness of her dark eyes startled him. She seemed neither very young

36 THE DESERT AND MRS. AJAX

nor yet thirty—a little thin, a little worried, but still brave—with cheeks which would tinge with red and lips that would curve again into a smooth bow when life was kinder.

Yet, it was not because her dress was worn and shiny that the ranchman began to feel sorry for her, but because he saw she felt ashamed. As his eyes rose from the patched blue skirt and carefully hidden shoes her own eyes filled under the momentary scrutiny and her chin quivered.

“I heard about you,” Holly said, “and I got you another so you wouldn’t feel mean while you were waiting for dinner.”

He groped in his pocket, whence came a wonderful odor of freshly-made sandwiches, and pressed something hard and white into her hand.

The girl examined the object curiously. And then, with a glint of amusement in her eyes, she began, daintily, to eat the egg.

CHAPTER III

At the lower end of Moab Valley a ranch lay drowsing under a soft pall of heat. In the yellow-floored corrals some motionless horses stared somnolently through the bars—in the rich mud of the irrigating ditches a family of irritated ducks complained together concerning the heated term. A fat white dog, that had been sleeping on the doorstep, arose, stretched himself, yawned abysmally, and revolved into a sleeping position again. Seated in a chair, back tilted against the cool, stone wall of the ranch-house, a solitary white man dozed in blissful content, his hat-brim resting on his nose. And it came to pass that there was peace throughout all the land of Moab.

It was upon this pastoral idyl that the Inter-Continentalers, followed quickly by the Trans-Oceanicers, rudely projected themselves. Entirely forgetting their upbringing the trained dogs leaped from the wagon and fell upon the fatter white one in an untrained uproar of sound—while ducks and chickens flew in agitated circles—while range

38 THE DESERT AND MRS. AJAX

ponies danced and trunks and boxes came tumbling to the ground in alarming confusion.

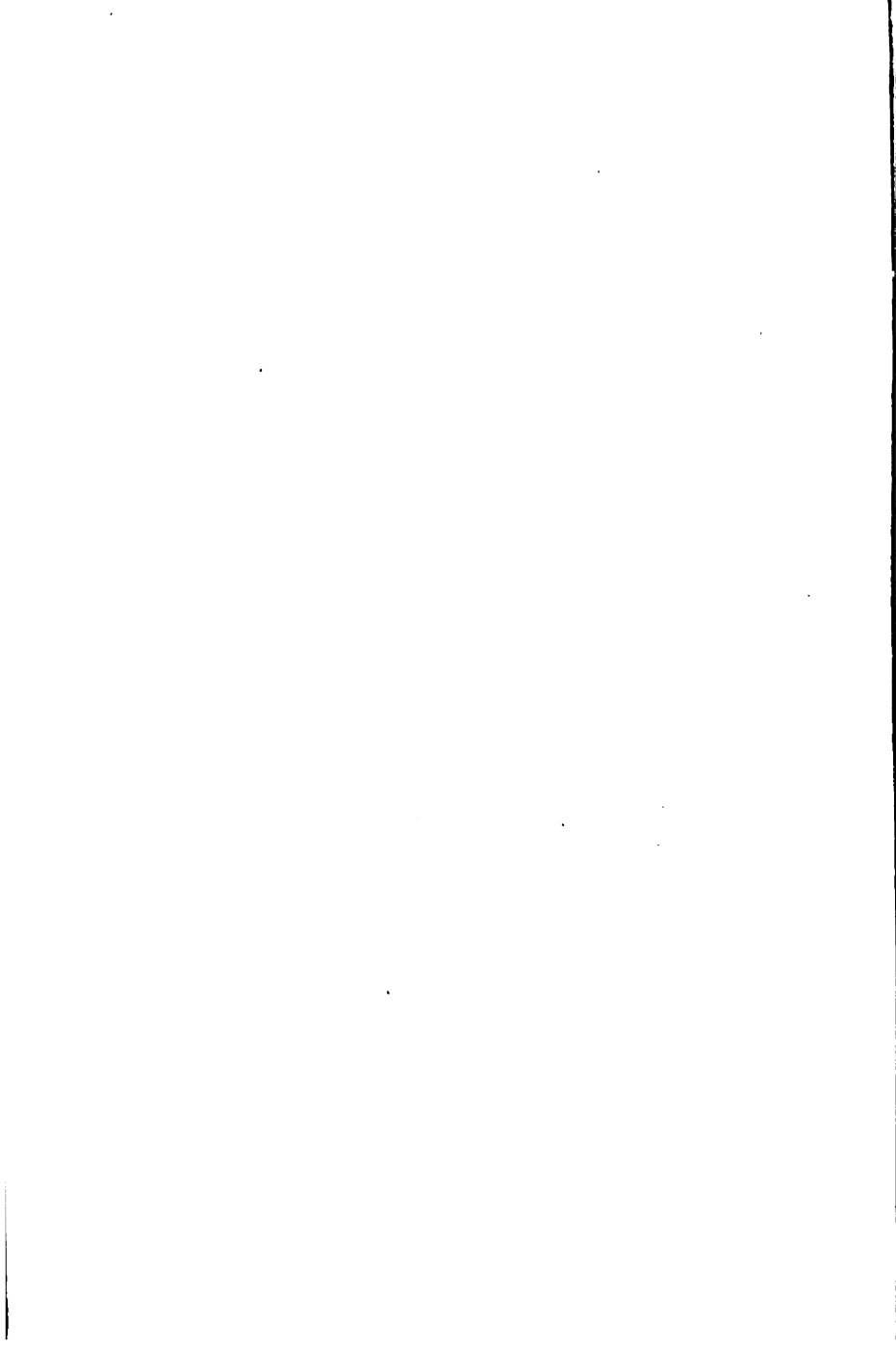
The man on the porch woke up with a start. Where, but a short moment before, the dust motes had flickered through placid solitude he now beheld an elderly gentleman with a craftily innocent face who held in one hand a sinister, tube-like weapon trimmed with silver. With the other hand he was striving to drag an animal of strange proportions through the front gate. The animal, though plainly unwilling, was being progressed by some unseen force in the rear, from whence also came the loud, warning cry, "Steer him more *Port*, Altamont."

"Say, YOU!" shouted the foreman, catapulting out of his chair. "Nothing like that allowed on this ranch. Just gallop it right away." Approaching no closer than his first rush carried him he leveled a trembling forefinger at the center of the beast, so that there might be no mistake. "Take it right away," he shouted fearfully. "Only tell me where to kick it and I'll do it myself."

"Don't hurt the family pets, Drybone," said a reassuring voice from the box-seat. "Can't you see we've just come home for a while?"



"STEER HIM MORE PORT, ATTAMONT"



With a dazed expression on his face the foreman stepped aside and stared helplessly at the Blondellis hurtling by him with boxes and baggage. Near at hand Imogene was chaining the elephant to a convenient tree. Meanwhile, she shouted directions to her husband, who was endeavoring to aid Cobrita with a large green box. As might have been expected, the box presently slid from the wagon and fell heavily upon Mr. Ajax.

The foreman sprang forward with a cry of alarm. As he did so "The Largest Boa Constrictor in Captivity" emerged from the box and slid between his agitated legs like a stream of living oil.

"Easy there, Drybone," laughed Holly, and held back the stick which seemed to leap from the ground into the foreman's hand. "Don't mind the snake. He's *asleep!*" He turned to his new friends with a gesture of introduction. "Mr. Drybone Peters, your humble servant, who never stole anything but his wages."

The circus paused and bowed formally at the dazed Drybone, while Imogene gripped his hand in silent good-will, at which the foreman's grin bravely continued.

"These all are friends of yours, I might in-

40 THE DESERT AND MRS. AJAX

quire?" he murmured, as his dog-like brown eyes yearned affectionately over his superior. "Y'u hasn't been hooked up by the Devil Dodger, has y'u, Dick?"

"Don't be foolish, partner," was the abrupt response, as Holly led the way into the house. "We've been together 'most too long, now."

"I didn't know," Drybone answered vaguely, and a spare hand went up to rumple his iron-gray hair in sad perplexity. "That two-tailed critter without any face might be a trooso."

The ranchman ushered his friends into the new home with a faint twinkle in his eye. But when they drifted back to him from their explorations, puzzled but thoroughly discreet, he sought the Strong Woman's intelligent eye for assistance.

"It's an old Mormon ranch-house. Quite a lot of women lived here once. It wouldn't be polite to say just how many men."

"There wasn't many, then," remarked Imogene shrewdly. "Not if I know them."

"We had to muck out a good deal after I bought," the ranchman continued. "I never knew religion could pester a man so—the 'Zig-zags through Zion' and 'Little Steps for Little Feet' must have been six inches deep on the floor, till we

baptized it all in the irrigating ditch, and Drybone improved a portrait gallery of Brigham Youngs with the coal-oil can. But even then it was pretty mean and lonely until Drybone papered all this front parlor with the Book of Mormon.

“ ‘First Nephi’ begins over there by the mantel-piece. It gallops around pretty hard for two laps, and peters out by the stuffed snake in the corner. After that, ‘Second Nephi’ takes hold—and reveals and educates all the way to the pink-and-green rocker. Between there and the genuine seashell on the what-not it’s fairly exciting, but the south side of the stoep is rather low-grade—laws, mostly—and fights in the kitchen. If you want good wars and private killings you have to lie down on your back by the base-board.

“ Night after night I used to lie awake watching Drybone on his hands and knees trailing the Nephi family with a candle. He got so after a while that he even knew ’em all by name, and just who Nephi’s best friends were, and how they sold him the watered stock. About the fourth night I felt something pawing around and dropping hot candle grease on my face. So I woke up and said:

“ ‘What’s the excitement, Drybone? Didn’t you chew your cucumbers?’ ”

“ ‘I’m searchin’ for page forty-two,’ said Drybone. ‘I left friend Nephi over there by the door-jamb along about twelve-thirty and I don’t mind tellin’ you he was in the h—l of a fix! I’ve been around to the stuffed snake twice already and he hasn’t got out yet. I’m going to stay with him a while,’ he said. ‘He hasn’t got too many friends.’ About four in the morning he woke me up and whispered that he’d found it. Nephi had got out of jail and been elected Sheriff.

“And so,” said Holly, “we’ve got about everything here that it’s safe for two old desert rats to have—a genuine circulating library, and a telephone wire to Moab and a new bed to sleep in every night. The only thing we’re short on is *help*.”

The ranchman was secretly longing for the despised Chinaman left behind in Moab. When he thought of his own cooking he hesitated. When he thought of Drybone’s he turned pale.

Under the stress of his perplexity his voice faded away and he looked up in the faint hope of sympathy, perhaps from the dark-eyed girl who had sat on the box-seat. But while he had been speaking the circus had undergone disintegration, and when he came to look about him the passage where he

stood was quite empty. Chancing to glance through a window he descried Doogan Blondelli moving blithely springwards with a pail. From the woodpile came a crackling sound which denoted the measured activity of Mr. Ajax. Tiptoeing down the hall he came upon the two girls making ready a dinner table. Presently he saw the Strong Woman stride across the kitchen with unerring scent and unearth the frying-pan from a closet under the sink.

"I hid it there so's I'd know *just* where it was," gasped Drybone over his shoulder. "Ain't it wonderful?"

If the Promised Land had seemed gaunt and grim to those dogged souls with whom Brigham Young colonized Nevada, it now bore all the more eloquent witness to Drybone's theory that the Mormons, above all else, were husbandmen.

For unmeasured æons it had lain under 'an overburden of sun and drought, its hot valleys a glittering menace to the settler, its barren, yellow sinks snarling up at him with the perpetually bared teeth of a starving animal. But now, wherever water could be made to run and ground harrow, fortune followed in some measure and out of the

44 THE DESERT AND MRS. AJAX

arid basins emerald-floored canyons reached, long-fingered, into the hills whence came their help.

Holly's ranch-house lay in one of these cultivated necks, resting on the crest where the mesa swell broke against the foothills and half hidden in its trees. A cheerfully gurgling brook, fresh from the cool stones and mosses of the canyon, sauntered in on an easy lateral at one side through rows of poplar, locust, and balm-of-gilead, and dimpled past the long, two-storied house, to disappear eventually among the corrals, where cattle nosed in it by day and two-legged animals went stealthily by night to cool their feet. In front, one looked down a gentle slope into a velvety basin of sage and greasewood, whose undulations faded, with hazy enchantment, into a misty gray, soft as a dove's wing. And then up would go the eye, high over the challenging, blood-red and yellow porphyry buttes on the other side of the valley to where the wine-purple bulk of the mountains sent up a snow-tipped spear to pierce the blue. And over it all sang the afternoon wind of the West, purring softly over the golden-crested rabbit-brush, swaying the purple acreage of the bee-flower till it spread like a splendid mantle at the feet, sweeping out of the infinite distance with immeasurable

strength, keen and dry always and very good for the soul.

Dick Holly, returning from an inspection of the ranch, drew a rocking-chair towards him and sat down. Out of his gropings for expression his heart struck the simple note of gratitude that he had been able to leave the cities behind him and come again into his own. The only thing that prophesied disturbance of this tranquillity was the revelation of the day before.

Some one was concocting serious trouble for him and the glittering treasures of the Yellow Dog across the desert at Bullionfield, and he was growing restive under his inability to fathom their plans. Buckner, the storekeeper, had owned the Yellow Dog and had sold it to Holly—and Dan Drew had owned the Atlas and sold it to Macklin, or else Macklin had shot him for it, that much was certain. But why had Buckner formed so sudden a friendship with Macklin? And why had Macklin just begun to talk about an "apex suit" to determine his rights to the Yellow Dog vein? Furthermore, and more important to Dick Holly than all the rest of the mystery, was Flatwheel's story of the tattoo mark. Could it possibly be that old Joe Macklin was the teamster of long ago?

46 THE DESERT AND MRS. AJAX

A door opened quietly and the Strong Woman appeared. She, too, seated herself and began an unobtrusive rocking. She had changed her close-fitting jersey for a soft, white waist and the Gordian knot of her hair had been combed into a looser, pleasanter form. Her general atmosphere was one of placid motherliness, which was borne out when she finally spoke.

"I never *hoped* to see such a peaceful place."

The ranchman gave her a grateful look. "Yes, ma'am, so it is—but still it did me a lot of good to hear that racket at the table to-day. I lost all of ten years somewheres between the soup and pie."

"Don't talk about having a home or I'll cry," the woman answered soberly. "I can stand a lot, myself—I was raised in Kansas—but you'll never know how anxious I was about those girls. When G. Edward left us they just went all to pieces. Of course, most all of us have got a little money set away, but generally it's in some savings bank. And that's what made me run so down the road—I thought if I could only borry a little of that twenty-sixty-seven we might be able to worry along somehow till things got straightened out—or we could get back to California and soak the elephant."

"About Cobrita, now," Imogene continued in

a lowered voice, as she hitched her rocker closer along the porch. "Of course, you know she's going to be married to Angelo. This was to be their last trip because Angelo's got a good job in the boiler factory back to Salt Lake, and the little girl wants to have a home. Alberto's a quiet fellow—most likely he'll go to live with them. As for Altamont and me—I guess we can always go along on 'small time' for a living. It's hard for him, but I don't mind it so much. Only, I *would* like to have a place and a big, wild lawn like this one in front of my house. I expect this valley must be five miles wide."

"Yes, ma'am—and ten more," said the ranchman, considering in passing that the dark-eyed girl had not been mentioned.

"Clarice—Clarice is *different*," continued Imogene. "That's about the only way I can say it—you'll see for yourself, after a while. Wherever she gets it I dunno—or she, either. She doesn't even know who her father was. You wouldn't pick her out for one of the best trapeze artists in the business, would you?"

"Ma'am!"

"Why, yes—that's her act—didn't you know? And I must say I never saw a better—S-s-s-h.

48 THE DESERT AND MRS. AJAX

Here she comes now. I guess she's had a good old nap. I said to 'em—'Just you children go and get a real, long sleep and dream you're in Heaven with Saint Peter wearing spurs and a six-shooter.' "

The Strong Woman had also said other things—in fact, the circus people had severally spoken their minds and each had promptly assumed a daily chore. Even at that very moment a pall of yellow dust hung over the corral, where the Equestrian Twins were trying out Holly's horses, and out in the back yard Cobrita was taking stock of the fowls. Within, the Belvawney had been examining the carpets, while if Altamont's flute purled melodiously in the rear it was only preliminary to a descent on the wood-pile.

"And what do *you* think of it, Clarice?" asked Imogene, with a meaning look at Holly.

The girl leaned lightly against a pillar, outlining her slim grace against a cloudless infinity of blue. Although she was in repose it seemed to the ranchman as if she gave out a strange eagerness for action—as if the sweet, dark eyes were alight with an impulsive reaching out for new appreciations. The parted lips, the pose of her supple body and rounded neck seemed to reflect a thirst for knowledge as beautiful as it was naïve. Her face was

cool and fresh after her sleep, and the softly pulsing blood painted two bright spots on her cheeks as she answered honestly:

"It makes me want to live forever."

Mrs. Ajax looked puzzled, but the man's eyes flashed a quick appreciation.

"She doesn't like the circus much," he thought. "She wants to get out somewhere and *live*—where things are roomy."

"Do you think you'll ever go back?" teased Imogene.

The girl turned, smiling, and with a supple movement, took the ample shoulders into her embrace.

"I've left the circus, Old Big-heart," she murmured, her cheek pressed tight against the Strong Woman's. "I left it two whole minutes ago. Never again for Mademoiselle Belvawney, sometime of London, Paris, the Winter Circus—and Tidioute."

"Going to leave the 'kinkers,' honey?" the elder woman asked thoughtfully, and patted the capable young hand on her shoulder. "What do you think you'll do?"

The girl looked bravely but a trifle pinkly at

50 THE DESERT AND MRS. AJAX

the quiet-eyed ranchman. "I'm going to be Mr. Holly's private secretary, if I may. You know I used to help Mr. Pilkington with the accounts—until there weren't any accounts any more. I've just been thinking that if Mr. Holly has a gold mine, *someone* ought to keep track of the gold as it comes out—and write letters saying it was positively not for sale—and keep count of the steers and calves—and order shoes for the horses and things for the pigs to eat—and—and—*everything!* Why, I think there's *lots* to do on a farm!"

"So there is, child," smiled the Strong Woman, making room on the other arm of her chair for the doll-like Cobrita, who had appeared with Doogan Blondelli in tow. "Think *you'll* ever go back, Little Rattler?"

"Not under the big top, she won't, you bet," announced the Blondelli quickly. "*We're* going into the *chicken* business—we've been figuring it all out on a barrel-top out in the yard. We started with a rooster and six hens apiece and she got nearly a million chickens in five years on her side of the barrel, and, somehow, I got more than twice as many on mine. But, anyhow, at ten cents a pound—at ten cents——" Doogan's

voice faded away as his mind grappled with the stupefying sum.

"At ten cents a pound," the Snake Lady stated stoutly, "we can make more than two hundred thousand dollars! Isn't it *lovely*, Imogene?"

"Chickens are good," a voice conceded from the porch corner where the silent Mike had seated himself, "but them *pigs*, now! Why haven't I *never* thought of pigs—and me an Irishman! All ye have to do is to fence up your alfalfa fields in two long lines of squares—with gates between. Ye thin drive, or indooce, these here little pigs into Field Number Wan. Listen to me—I've it all figured out. After eating themselves simply *crazy* in Field Number Wan ye persoo thim into Field Number Two. Whereupon the alfalfa *im-mejutly grows up behind thim again!*"

A thin voice nearby raised itself in protest.

"But that is nothing more or less than willful deception of the pigs!"

"Be quiet, Altamont," said Imogene not unkindly. "Please get your flute out for us, there's a good boy."

"Now, the *last* field—say, Field Number Ten," continued the authority on pork, "should be conveniently locayted be the railroad track, where,

52 THE DESERT AND MRS. AJAX

after the pig is no longer able to walk, he can be pushed or rolled into a car——”

But the little gray man, curled up against the steps, had raised his flute to his lips, and with the first wailing notes came silence.

The sun-glow faded across the valley—the haze in the hills turned from violet to darkness. Unconsciously the women’s arms crept round each other—the men’s pipes went out. Long ago the shabby little figure had passed out of their ken and he had become, instead, only a kindly natured chum who was giving them lavishly out of his only possession—a gift that cured and rested, flushing their minds clear with a sweet wave of sound. And while they stared out into the gathering darkness, out of the twilight of the little man’s memory his own dear shapes came flocking round to aid him, their soft eyes peering through the dulled windows of his mind, their tiny hands tugging at the puzzling door.

There was a faint movement among the women, and Imogene motioned to Clarice, who stole across the porch and brought back the little man’s felt hat which lay beside him. “He tries to pass it round,” Imogene whispered. “I can’t break him of it.”

Presently, the little man's notes ceased and he groped mechanically on his head for his hat. Not finding it, he sighed softly and dismembered the flute.

Imogene now rose and murmured a hint for the two girls to help her in the kitchen. But one of the two, looking back, saw a tall, ruddy-faced man who, with his arm around the little man's shoulders, was gently thrusting something into a vest-pocket.

CHAPTER IV

IN the light of early morning down where the dazzling sunshine fell through the cottonwoods in yellow splotches on the corral, Mr. Drybone Peters was soliloquizing. With his feet far apart—the new Stetson that Holly had brought him on the back of his head—and a spear of hay revolving thoughtfully in his mouth, the fascinated foreman was studying the actions of the strange beast lately put in his care and insulting it flagrantly under his breath.

“But where does he *put* it?” Drybone muttered angrily, as the elephant swayed to and fro and stuffed itself with hay. “Six hundredweight of good alfalfa gone this week—and here it’s only *Wednesday!* Where do *I* come in, please tu enquire? Why, I ain’t even drawing cyards in this *fiesta!*”

At the sound of footsteps, Drybone hastily turned around with a rather conscious look on his seamed, bronzed face. As he did so, the animal silently insinuated its trunk through the fence.

Hovering above the foreman's head for a calculative moment, it suddenly dropped down and snatched away—*the new hat!*

With a hoarse cry of rage, the foreman whirled about and pawed the bars. Scaling the fence with frantic agility he reached the top just in time to see a frightful spectacle. The new hat was following the hay!

In vain Drybone lifted his bony arms aloft and called upon the gods for vengeance. The elephant only meditated on the strange diets of foreign lands—and blinked a cynical eye. Presently, in the midst of the foreman's plaintive bayings, the hat was reproduced and thrown disgustedly over the fence.

"Well, dog his cats!" howled the foreman, clambering down to confront Cobrita and an apronful of eggs; "the rubber-nosed robber!"

"*That's* all right, Mister Drybone," laughed Cobrita. "He's a rogue elephant—and they just love to steal. Isn't it a good thing he's a dwarf?"

"Ma'am!" gasped Drybone, following her into the house with the hat clutched to his breast. "Him only a sample copy? Oh, well! Just as you say, my dear. But even that don't make it legal for an animal tu laugh at y'u," the foreman

56 THE DESERT AND MRS. AJAX

mumbled doggedly. "He wunk his little old red eye at me—I see him do it."

Close on their footsteps the two acrobats came, quite ready for breakfast and full of ideas for a new hay-baler that the owner of the ranch must buy. Instantly Cobrita caught the contagion and began to plan extensive quarters for her menagerie. While, as for the Chêf and the Private Secretary, they seemed to dust, scrub, and estimate by both day and night. To the faintly resentful Drybone, the ranchman's fortune seemed already in danger.

"Have you given any thought to the library yet, Imogene—the carpet, you know? Don't you think a *good*, flowered ingrain would do?"

"With furniture to match? But *what* about curtains, Dearie?"

"And stand-lamps?"

"And a book on pigs," supplied the ruminative Mike.

"Two horse-clippers and a de-horner," said Doogan, with a business-like air.

"Three packages of Magic Dog Cakes, please," Cobrita added. "Bosco, the fat white one, is sick."

"Well," remarked Imogene, summarizing the situation abruptly, "if to-day's Wednesday, it's

Montgomery Ward Day, anyhow. Hustle up and eat, everybody, and we'll take all morning filling out the blanks. You help me with my numbers, Clarice. The last time we ordered I wrote 'Catalogue Number 2537' instead of 2357 for a one-ninety-eight pongee waist with blue dots, and they sent me back thirty-seven cents and a picture of Blind Tom."

"Y'u kin order fer me, too," muttered the dismayed foreman. "I'm just all broke up fer a combination brass bed and music-box. Ain't y'u going tu come along with us, Altamont?" he cackled. "Better take *something*. Have a cigar."

The little man meditated and rolled his eyes heavenwards. "I have always *wished* for a baby grand piano," he said mildly, "but in consideration of the perpetually existent exigencies consequent upon nomadic peregrinations——"

"Don't say another word," Holly interrupted swiftly. "We'll order it to-day."

A half-hour later the one-time owner of a ranch property in the Moab Valley paused at the window of what he had heard was now his "office" and peered uncertainly within.

A young woman in a white shirtwaist and snowy paper cuffs was busying herself with some piles of

58 THE DESERT AND MRS. AJAX

letters laid out on a table—the very cleanest table the ranchman had ever seen. The woodwork had recently been scrubbed and the top covered with smooth, white oil-cloth, while in the center of the oil-cloth were pens, pencils, and some blotters tied with a blue bow. A bowl of wild flowers also stood on the table, and whenever the young woman could not decipher the particular letter in hand she only laid it on a particular pile and smelled the flowers and smiled and took up her task again. With the letters apparently sorted out according to some system, she was seen to sharpen a pencil and make notations in a book, after which she considered a bill of groceries and frowned blackly at the total. Then she called kitchenwards, and in prompt response the bulk of the Strong Woman filled the doorway, the cold glint of the housewife in her eye.

“Imogene—did we get any ‘Grandma’s Special Selected String Beans’ in that last shipment?”

“Not a darned Grandma,” responded Imogene accurately. “Are they claiming shipment? Don’t you let those robbers soak us, Lovey Dove. Altamont says there wasn’t anything which might be considered to even approximate a bean.”

“And the ham was bad?”

"The ham was *very* bad. Is that all, Dearie? I'm baking, you know. Don't forget to knock off the freight on the ham, will you, Sweetheart?" and Imogene slowly retreated.

"I won't. (It comes to eight cents—and the beans to three-eighty-four)," she whispered to herself, with red lips pouted. "(That makes three-ninety-two *less*, with the cost of the ham yet to come off.) All right, Imogene. Thank you very much."

The unseen auditor withdrew from his eaves-dropping. With such a Cerberus at the Gate there would be no occasion to quibble over that cost-of-living which the outside world was worrying about, and perhaps talent such as this could be utilized in still another way.

"I'd be obliged to you if you'd sort of run your eye over this little list of mine," a voice said.

The ranchman, hat in hand, was standing beside the table with the flowers on it. He paused after speaking, for awkwardness had come over him under the secretary's quiet eyes. In one of those minute fractions of time allowed us for our most illuminating thoughts, he had become aware that this young lady was thoroughly in earnest in what she was doing. Inspired by the new surround-

60 THE DESERT AND MRS. AJAX

ings, Miss Clarice Belvawney had taken a very business-like grip on life again, and the seriously impersonal light in her wide eyes stated quietly that she would hold it.

And yet, with another rare flash of intuition, the ranchman knew he had never been so close to all that was lovably feminine. The delicate aroma of wholesome womanhood, mingled with the scent of flowers, stole upon his helpless senses. He felt himself staring at the shining waves in her hair, his mind temporarily palsied by this nearness to something at once delightful and terrifying. Before the daintiness of her person, he felt hulking and red-handed in his khaki and high boots.

"It's the pay-roll from those little gold mines over at Bullionfield," he managed to continue. "After you sort of skim through and fix up the spelling, I'll get the money for the envelopes."

Now, at the time the sheet had been contrived in the privacy of his own room it had seemed a veritable work of art, but as it came forth from his pocket it seemed to undergo a startling change. Under his own eyes, the paper took on a depressing coat of smudge. Instead of Spencerian fluences, its writing became a network of uncouth scrawls, while with crooked rulings and eye-searing mis-

takes in every column, it was now only an ugly, dreadful thing that any schoolboy would have scorned. As he saw the deft fingers draw a line through each damning error, his face slowly reddened.

"It's funny how those numbers move around so—I thought I had 'em bedded down for the night," he said, with unsure humor, at which no one laughed and he grew sadly confused. With every investigation some new error seemed to be uncovered, and soon there was the peculiar discovery that one—"Pink-eye Reilly"—had earned the extravagant total of thirty dollars in a single day's work.

As the cool, questioning eyes rose to his, the ranchman's brain contracted into a hard knot and its functions appeared to cease. He tugged at his mustache, sighed heavily, and finally tried to smudge out the sum with his finger.

"It must be 'three' dollars," he muttered desperately. "Those little 'o's' bother me. Pink-eye couldn't make 'wages' falling down a perpendicular shaft at twenty dollars a foot."

Under the stress of his feelings the secretary also grew uncomfortable and employed her hands with a vagrant sheet of paper.

62 THE DESERT AND MRS. 'AJAX

"That's it," the ranchman said instantly. "Make a new one. Make it out *your* way—the right way. And, here! Take this! I don't feel right safe with the thing in my possession." Plucking a check-book out of his coat he laid it on the table before her and covered it with a powerful, brown hand. "You can be watchdog," he said, thoroughly angry with himself and temporarily unafraid of the eyes and hair and smooth, white throat. "When any of this outfit, including this busted out old miner, wants any money after this,—they come to *you!*"

"But I'm not a bookkeeper, Mr. Holly," protested the embarrassed Miss Belvawney. "I'm only quick at figures. And, as for writing your checks for you—why, you don't know anything about me. You don't even know who I am."

"When I brought you all down here you didn't ask who *I* was," he said swiftly.

A slow tide of pink stained the girl's face.

"We were hungry," she said.

"So am I hungry," he answered soberly. "I guess I've been that way for quite a while. And now that the table's ready *don't* tell a fellow he can't sit down. This old desert does queer things to a man if he stays with it too long. Sometimes

it gives but mostly it *takes*—and only in big figures. It took all of *me* for thirty years and then was kind-hearted and gave me back more than my share. If it wasn't for that I'd be a gray old desert rat like Drybone—who's lost his appetite. Drybone isn't hungry any more. Perhaps he used to be, but now he'll go out and sit all day on a hill and stare at the dry lakes and the shiny hot rocks and sand and lizards and brush, and away off at the old blue mountains jiggling up and down in the heat. It's a kind of opium pill for Drybone—he says it makes him forget. Drybone used to have a family back East somewhere to think about, I reckon, but now he don't care any more. He'd just as lieve sit still and see things go by. The desert's *got* him, you see. His mind's so used to resting on it that it isn't a good fighting mind any more. It's full of big, flat places where the water's too scarce for thoughts to grow. Take old Drybone off the desert? You *couldn't*! He'd die on your hands. And that's why I was hoping you'd help me out a little while I was trying to humanize myself again. I expect I'll lose my appetite, like Drybone, pretty soon but, in the meantime, I might be considered fairly hungry."

"He's lonely," the girl thought, when he had

64 THE DESERT AND MRS. AJAX

gone. "He wants someone to talk to besides the men. But what can he see in poor *me*? I don't know a mine from a well. But I'd just as lieve. Anything to get away from canvas. I saw a mine in the hill behind the house the other day. I guess I can learn."

"He talks as if he were an old, old man," Miss Belvawney said hotly to herself. "He isn't a single day over forty. I'm going to ask Imogene."

"I know all about that mine," the Strong Woman stated confidently, when the girl had asked one of her questions but, for some feminine reason, had retained the other. "I sent Altamont up there last week with a candle to explore, and he said that as closely as he could ascertain it was merely a dank labyrinth containing a mountain rat! So I ran right up there and killed the rat and found all those spoons we've been missing and my gold thimble and the new egg-beater that went away Tuesday. You know, I'd figured all along on a trade-rat as soon as I found those little stones in the spoon-box. Then I did some mining with the handle of the egg-beater, and *say!* *Clarice!* I think that mine's just *full* of gold! I showed some of the rocks to Drybone, and he claimed they would go two thousand pounds to the ton.

And he said he'd go up there with me to-day and show me just how they blast it out. He says Mr. Holly doesn't like it as well as the Yellow Dog, and if that's the case and *he* don't want it I'm going to ask if *I* can have it. I'll just bet *I* could drill holes in rocks!

"Why—just *think* of the money there is in mines!" and Imogene spun around from her stove to where the fluffy-haired, blue-eyed Cobrita and the strangely pensive Belvawney sat side by side on the kitchen-table. "Didn't Mr. Holly get a hundred and fifty thousand dollars for only part of the Yellow Dog? And don't the men say that when it's all opened up they can dig out a *terribul* lot? And all done in a single year, mind you! Oh, there's no use talking. It's *mines* for me every clip, girls. *Just you wait!* Harry's chicken farm and Mike and his wonderful pig maze won't be in it when I strike it rich!

"And here's another thing," and Imogene's voice lowered confidentially before her round-eyed auditors. "I've been watching that quotation sheet in the office every day for a week and the way those Goldfield mines are booming up is somepin frightful. 'Blue Pig' was *eight* cents Saturday, *nine* on Monday, and *eleven* on Tuesday,

66 THE DESERT AND MRS. AJAX

and more than a *thousand* shares sold. 'Little Annie' is way up in the clouds around six bits—and *Mohawk*! WELL! *You* know how we lost Annabelle, the Andalusian Albino, that time at Winnemucca. She was just putting on her red, clocked stockings and her gold boots for the afternoon act when she heard the Wild Man from Java reading out of the newspaper how Mohawk had gone to nineteen dollars.

" 'I hope I've got it *right*,' she says to me, all in a shiver and crying like a baby. 'My trunk's just cram jam full of Mohawk stock I bought for nineteen *cents*! A traveling man told me all about it once while we were going down in an elevator. I'm going back to the station and go right straight home to my mother in Kansas City,' she says, 'Just as soon as I get done crying.'

" 'But what are you crying *now* for, Dearie?' says I.

" And she says, 'Well—you'd cry, too, if you'd used more than a thousand dollars worth of it for mean—old—*curlpapers*! ' "

But Holly, in the meantime, had sought no company. As he walked away from the house and past the corral he even failed to notice the unconscious Drybone, planning revenge under the eye

of the enemy. The ranchman's long strides took him away from the scene of his discomfiture and led him down an avenue of humming hives to where a fence separated the long-aisled orchard from a quiet meadow. Here he hoisted himself to the top rail and gave himself up to thought, his feet crooked in the fence, his hat tilted over his eyes.

He was wondering if there were very many women in the big outside world like the sweet-eyed young girl he had just left. The Strong Woman had been entirely right—Clarice was *different*—although the dismaying speed with which the unknown had come to be the single desirable woman in the whole universe for Dick Holly of Moab Desert hadn't left overmuch time for analysis. Only a week before he had been on the point of actually regretting his success, for it had seemed only a peak from which he stared out on the flat lands of "Nothing-to-do," but to-day, he saw, there were other peaks to climb. A full, strong wind from the outer world had blown away the mists and shown him new heights and a trail through an unsuspected valley.

And so he climbed dizzily down from the fence and somnambulated through the orchard, dreaming

mad dreams as he went. For, who shall say that the fires of middle-age burn less brightly than those of headstrong twenty? With Recollection to reject the clinkers and Good Judgment to do the stoking, one may yet get a fair, steady blaze that needs no noisy safety-valve.

But as the ranchman passed through the trees and neared the Garden of Eden, the Evil One appeared to him—in the form of an irrigating ditch. Years ago, he remembered, he had always jumped that particular ditch, generally without an effort. To-day, however, it was much too wide, and as he stared at it with a heavy frown on his face, it seemed to grow still wider. He stared at it silently for a moment longer, then shook his head with something that sounded like a groan and turned away. He was too old.

Over on the ranch-house porch a white waist was gleaming, but the man, staring at a little tunnel in the hillside behind the corral, kept his eyes turned away. "I'll take another look at that Morning Glory vein," he said to himself. "But I guess it's like me—petered out."

A careful examination of the ill-fated Morning Glory only went too far to confirm that suspicion, and as he came out to daylight again and ran his

eye over the admirable width of outcrop it was with a feeling of genuine regret. It all looked very good—on the surface—but from what the tunnel showed he knew the vein would have to go only a foot or two lower to fade out entirely.

"I wonder if they're familiar with 'gash veins' at the 'club'?" he meditated. "All but that dump ore wouldn't buy a Willie boy his cigarettes. But it would be fairer to keep it in the family for a beer cellar," and pondering this idea, he zig-zagged down the trail to the house. Here he found Imogene, standing open-mouthed before the daily list of quotations.

"Little Annie a *dollar!*" she was soliloquizing in an awe-struck whisper. "My! my! That's entirely too dear, now. Perhaps 'Red Ants' at seven cents would be better for me to buy—or even this new one—'Coconoco Coalition'—that's only *three!*" Then, as she saw the ranchman—"Don't you think Coconoco Coalition sounds good?"

"Stocks with shorter names are better," that individual answered. "They *say* that *women's* names are best of all."

"Can a woman find a mine?" asked Imogene, whirling swiftly about.

70 THE DESERT AND MRS. AJAX

"Only the ugly ones ever have any luck," was the answer. "The really good claims, you see, are all located by old prospectors who've been romancing around all their lives on beans and sow bosom. Generally some girl's at the bottom of it all, so when they find the ledge they sweeten it up with her name, like 'Little Annie'—or 'Alice J.'—or 'Isabel.' And it's always a splendid mine and makes just loads of money."

"And then they go right home and marry little Annie, don't they?" asked Imogene artlessly, for the Lifter of Great Weights was nothing if not a match-maker.

"Y-e-e-s," Holly admitted wearily. "Or loaf around on the desert a few more years so that little Annie's oldest boy can have a job."

Failing to detect the irony of the last remark, Imogene only regarded the miner-ranchman with awakening surprise.

"But you called *your* mine 'The Yellow Dog,'" she objected pointedly.

"So I did," he conceded. "But, then, I never had much luck with women."

The Strong Woman, studying him intently, saw fit to ameliorate this condition. "But you *will* have," she said forcefully.

Holly turned a grave face on Mrs. Ajax. The customary twinkle in his eyes was entirely lacking—they looked lusterless and tired. The line from the nostril to the corner of his mouth was bitten deep into his cheek with chagrin. The ranchman had learned something about himself that morning.

"No," he said briefly. "No. I'm too old."

The Strong Woman, however, was not dismayed. "But you *will* have," she repeated confidently as she strode kitchenwards. "There's sponge cake in the oven, so I can't stop to explain, but you—leave—it—to—*me*."

He was still pondering this Delphic utterance when an Indian boy, with black hair streaming, shot out of the kitchen-door and clanged out a delayed dinner call on the ranch triangle.

"Imogene is surely restless," he reflected. "Perhaps she needs a mine to worry over," and musing over a bright idea, went in to dinner.

"What's the latest on 'Red Ant Hills,' Imogene?" inquired the younger Blondelli in the best of spirits, gayly entering the dining-room in a manner all his own.

"You stop walking into my dining-room on your hands with your feet in the air, or you'll get

no soup, Harry Doogan," snapped Imogene. "If you mean Red Ants, it's seven cents. Black Hills is so good it's been taken off the Board. How many fancy chickens did you hatch to-day, Mister Smarty?"

"One," said Harry briefly, cartwheeling gracefully into a chair beside his fiancée. "The egg was too big—it came out a duck. But we don't care, do we, Cobrita? That's better than picking out goose-eggs—like Imogene's mines."

"Don't brag too soon," warned that person darkly. "I might have a mine yet—just like Ringling might have you for a clown."

A flash of amusement showed in the ranchman's face.

"Do you really want a mine, Imogene?" he asked.

Something in his tones made Clarice's large eyes turn and envelop him in their soft light. "What is the man going to give away *now*?" the girl thought, with unsteady emotions. "Shall we leave him anything at all? It's begun to make me feel ashamed."

The man felt the look, for he smiled and even dared to wink. "Do you really want a mine?" he asked a second time of the speechless Strong

Woman. "You can have a deed to the Morning Glory if you like."

"Ma'am? Sir?" gasped Mrs. Ajax. "What for? I—I mean—for what?"

"Anything you say," was the easy reply, at which even Altamont and the silent Scanlan looked surprised. Only the genial foreman seemed unperturbed.

"Make it a raisin pie," cackled Drybone.

"*Done*," said Holly.

At this, not only amazement but also the prospect of untold riches ran riot in the Strong Woman's mind. Being futilely repressed, they soon emerged and contended for place on her beaming countenance, finally giving way to a gratitude shaded not in the least by incredulity but tinged, rather, with faint regret over the consideration.

"Just *one* pie?" Imogene quavered.

"One *good* pie," Holly answered.

A week later they saw him leaving them for several days. Something unknown to any of the circus except Clarice had called to him from across the desert at Bullionfield, and the bay pair was ready to whirl him away over the red-brown plain and the twinkling dry lakes to where the mysterious treasure-house lay in the smoky lap of the ranges.

74 THE DESERT AND MRS. AJAX

But the Strong Woman managed to speak a last, low-toned word over the buggy-wheel. "Drybone says, please to bring back some seven-eighths steel and a twelve-pound sledge. He's getting sore because I broke all his little tack-hammers."

Although none but the foreman and the Indian boys knew just what surprising changes had already taken place in the Morning Glory, it was undoubtedly an active spot, for the Strong Woman was no longer on view from nine to eleven in the morning or from two to four in the afternoon. At the latter hour, a series of muffled shocks in the hill were generally followed by her reappearance, very tired and dusty, and nursing strange blisters.

To-day Imogene and Drybone sat on powder-boxes at the mouth of the mine, watching the Indian boys load sacks of dump ore into a farm-wagon; a shipment to the smelter which had a more practical sponsor than the foreman, who was now advising it.

"We'll call this first shipment 'Lot Number Three Hundred and Fifteen—B.'" Drybone said to Imogene confidentially. "That will make us look like big producers."

"Great!" the lady responded, however she feared his ancient wiles. "Maybe, then, the smelter people will want to buy me out!"

"Mebbe," agreed Drybone thoughtfully, and his seamed face added some unsuspected lines of humor. "It might turn out like it did for Powder-itch Jones when he was digging a well by day's pay for a man back in Storey County, and struck a stringer of ore.

"Right away when Powder-itch panned it out he forgot all about the well. He ran a little drift off the shaft, and cross-cut—and panned again. And then he sank a few feet on an incline and drifted some more. In one place he even put up a raise and made a little stope. He kept it up quite a while.

"One day the man came back. When he sees the terrible big dump outside he lays down on his stummick and hollers:

"'Y'u got my well dug yet?'

"'Not quite,' says Powder-itch. 'Be keerful. Don't get too near the edge.'

"'I don't see any water,' the man says pretty soon. 'Derned if this ain't the queerest well I ever see. It don't *look* like a well *at all*. It looks

76 THE DESERT AND MRS. AJAX

more like a corkscrew.' Then the man thinks for a while and says:

" 'Ahem! It don't seem like y'u were highly interested in wells.'

" 'Oh, I might give y'u a week's work and take a sort of *half* interest in this one,' says Powder-itch, with a yawn.

" 'Done,' says the man. 'Work a week without any pay and we'll go halves on the water.'

" Next week the man comes back and lays down on his stummick and hollers:

" 'Y'u got my well dug yet?'

" 'Not quite,' says Powder-itch. 'Be keerful. Don't get too near the edge.'

" 'That water is surely deceitful,' the man says.

" 'It's worse than whisky,' says Powder-itch. 'And furthermore, I've a feelin' coming over me that I'm about to lose my interest again. If y'u say so I'll trade y'u back my half of the water for the well.'

" 'Done,' says the man.

" 'Done,' says Powder-itch. 'I sold the well part to-day for five thousand. I didn't want to sink it in *too* deep. I've always been taught to let well enough alone. And then——'

But the story of Powder-itch Jones was never

finished, for at the crucial moment the Strong Woman had risen hastily from the powder-box, and with loud breaths and heaving shoulders had been rapidly lost to view in the mine.

But however Imogene's venture was regarded there were no signs of envy when the mail brought her the returns from the smelter. Blissfully recovering from the shock which the figures gave her, she instinctively carried the good news to Miss Belvawney.

That young lady looked up from her reading and greeted her with earnest affection, which was not Clarice's way with women.

"I think you ought to know that we're all just as glad as we can be," she said. "You've watched over us so long and mothered us so carefully that I only wish it were twice as much. Mr. Holly will be back to-morrow, and I know he'll be happier than any of us. You're an old *dear*, Imogene, and I hope you strike a bonanza every single day."

Under treatment of so genuine a nature the Strong Woman immediately surrendered to the vein of sentiment that lay close to her martial exterior. Sinking into a rocker beside the girl, she stared thoughtfully out over the desert.

"A few more checks like that and maybe I can

78 THE DESERT AND MRS. AJAX

have something done for Altamont," she said. "He's been on my mind a lot, lately."

"Is he growing *worse*?" the girl asked, startled.

"He's getting *better*," was Imogene's quick response. "That's what's set me thinking."

"You know—we weren't always like this, Clarice. Altamont *was* somebody once. He was even a bigger man when I married him—he weighed a lot more, and he stood higher than I do now. I know we look awful funny together, but there *was* a time when you wouldn't have looked at *me* at all. And then he bumped his head in that train wreck coming out of Council Bluffs, Iowa. Well—since then Altamont hasn't done a great deal in this world. The doctors said there was a chance for him,—if I could only get them money enough. But somehow—somehow——"

"Now, n-e-e-ver mind, Imogene," the girl interposed. "Don't let your mind dwell on the impossible. We can't afford to be anything but cheerful here in another person's home, and I feel right down in my bones that if we stay here everything will turn out right. You don't want to go away for a while yet, do you?"

"Not on your sacred tin-type," whimpered

Imogene. "Do you think I'm crazy? I'm so happy I just want a good old cry."

During the subsequent interval for drying tears, the elder woman's eye fell on Clarice's book. "What have you got there, girlie?" she asked, with a return to her normal curiosity. "The words are all like names for corsets—it must be French."

"A history of the United States," Clarice explained, a little consciously. "I'm studying it in French to save time. I always stood well in French in school before I had to take gym classes in the old Turnverein, and this way I can learn two things at once. I bought some lovely books by mail last week," the girl confessed. "I've been longing for this chance for ever and ever so long."

"Hmmmmmm," said Imogene thoughtfully. "But men don't like little girlies that know so much."

"That wouldn't affect me," Clarice returned calmly.

"Because you don't know much, or because you don't like men?"

"Either—or *both*," was the collected response.

"My—my!" murmured the shocked Imogene.

"But you like Mr. Holly, don't you, Petty?"

"Very much."

"Hmmm," said Imogene dreamily. "Just see, Dearie, how your sleeve has started to ravel there at the elbow. Those Indian washerwomen are awfully hard on those fine goods. Who taught you to put your hair up that way, child? It looks awfully nice—I think you have the finest, sweetest hair, Clarice. And your skin's so good—and your *eyes*. This place has certainly done a lot for you—with your riding and all. You look made over. But you always *did* look like a lady."

"I hope so," the girl said soberly. "My mother was one."

There was not much doubt of it. But whatever mystery there was in the girl's past was dwarfed by the oddity that she should have been drawn into circus life at all. Popular fancy is apt to make acrobatics a matter of heredity, with the knack of the "double flip" or the ankle coyly engaging the back of the neck, passed down through Papa and Mamma Fortuno to all the Five Little Fearless Fortunos, but Clarice would have had to search still further for the source of her atavism. And yet, beyond a matchless physique whose hunger for activity brooked no refusal, there was nothing in the girl which could not be controlled except, per-

haps, when danger called. It was here that the real enemy lay hidden, for just as the wolf-dog returns to run with the pack and the descendant of the good four-bottle-man reaches instinctively for the decanter, so the Belvawney blood leaped up whenever any bright, perilous game challenged it.

Just how she had drifted into circus life, the girl hardly knew, except that work of some kind had become a necessity after her mother's death, and the gradual progression from Turner gymnastics to professional work under canvas had seemed a natural evolution. Although her girlhood had been spent in the East her life as a child had been passed in a small town in some Western State where, it seems, there had been a father. But he had been a very vague sort of father, who seemed to be forever patting her cheek and saying good-by, so that semi-penury and a single parent had always been accepted conditions for Clarice.

Beyond these fugitive memories the girl possessed only a single thing connected with her former life, and that was her mother's ring. It was not a particularly handsome ring, being only a rudely chased affair of clasped hands and made, so the ranchman said, of soft nugget gold, but somehow the understanding had persisted through-

82 THE DESERT AND MRS. AJAX

out the years that its replica was on her father's hand. Until to-day this had seemed a very slim clue indeed, but now that Clarice had entered on another phase of life she felt, and not unnaturally, that she needed a father more than she needed anything else, and so the poor little ring had come to be her most jealously guarded possession.

"Why don't you marry, Clarice?" Imogene pursued in purring tones. "What's the use of a girl forever fighting the world for her living? You don't want to juggle those little balls up on a trapeze from now till you're forty and then spend the rest of your life staring out of a boarding-house window! It's time you had a home of your own."

As the girl only stared straight before her without replying Imogene tried a few leads.

"I always thought that freckled-up hardware man in Salt Lake looked good. He——"

"Chewed tobacco," supplied Clarice, swiftly and finally.

"He wasn't as nice, perhaps, as the little druggist back in Pueblo. *He* was near-sighted, of course——"

"So he was," the girl said grimly. "Especially when his mother was with him."

"But how about the rich candy man's son in Denver? Surely *he* was all right, wasn't he? He had an automobile, anyway," muttered Imogene. "That's more than that young Englishman had who read poetry with you all the time on the train coming out of Vancouver. What ever became of him, Dearie? He had such bony legs."

"He went back home. His brother died. He's an Earl, now. Oh, I'm afraid you don't understand, Imogene," the girl cried despairingly. "I know I'm only a second-class acrobat but, somehow, I can't stand the common ones and the nice ones wouldn't have me."

"But *why* wouldn't they?" persisted Imogene stubbornly. "I'll bet fifty cents none of those Earlesses can stand on their head and juggle three balls! I guess those 'nice ones' you talk about never saw Clarice in her suit of little green ti——"

"Don't say that word!" the girl interrupted fuiously. "I won't have it. I never want to hear it again as long as I live. I *hate* it!" Two bright spots stained the girl's cheeks, her throat filled, her eyes burned like hot, twin stars.

"Give me a chance, Imogene," she said impulsively to that true and tried friend. "Just let me

84 THE DESERT AND MRS. AJAX

stay here a while and read some good books and study up my bookkeeping, so that I can get settled down to what I want to do. I've made a show of myself long enough."

She paused for a moment, then turned a strained face.

"*I've wasted my life,*" she said with bitter distinctness. "I've thrown it away. For a whole year I've tried to *get* somewhere, and *do* something, and *be* somebody, but it's all come to nothing. And it never *will* come to anything. I can just feel life slipping, slipping away from me like sand out of my fingers—and I can't seem to wake up. And yet I don't want much. I just want a place for myself, and friendships, and the things that others earn, and a decent, natural life where I can work for them. I've got it all *in* me—why can't I get it out? And the very *biggest* thing of all—I know now that *that* will never come. I want—I want——" The girl's voice fluttered and broke, and she hid her crimsoning face in her hands.

"I know, Dearie, I know," childless Imogene answered. "So do we all want it."

And so, after a time, with an understanding squeeze of a hand, the Strong Woman left the

girl to herself. But as she proceeded along the path to the kitchen she broke into broad smiles.

"Bookkeeping, *indeed*," she chuckled. "And Cobrita, *she* wanted to run away and bury herself in a retail shoe-store before Angelo spoke to her! And *I* wanted to be a milliner before Altamont condescended! Wouldn't I have made a dandy little milliner! It's all I can do to trim a pie!"

Then she stopped short before a male figure that seemed to start out of the ground at the kitchen-door.

"WELL, for GOODNESS SAKES!" she exclaimed, open-mouthed. "*Darned* if it isn't the Wild Man from Java come back to us! What in the world are you doing here, Wild Man?"

"Yas'm. This is me," the Indian responded diffidently. "My wife, here—*she make* me come."

"But where in Glory have you been all this time? Who cut your hair? What are you so fat for?"

"The Gov'ment—over on the Reservation. It's pretty good to us," the Wild Man said with a cheerful grin. "I got real clothes now. My wife—she been wash for you—maybeso long time. Some days I eat *three* meals!"

"Don't tell me she's been supporting you all

86 THE DESERT AND MRS. AJAX

this time," said the scandalized Strong Woman. "See here, Wild Man," she pursued relentlessly. "You've got to pay us for the little Trained Pig you ate. You'll have to work it out. Everybody works here, you know."

"Yass. I know."

"Well," announced Imogene with stern decision, "mornings you work in my mine. Mealtimes you wait on table. Afternoons you train the elephant. You do that for a month and maybe I'll forgive you. You like the elephant, you know."

"Y-a-a-s-s. I know."

"Humph! If you don't I'll break your neck, Wild Man. YOU KNOW!"

Although the departure of the Strong Woman left Miss Belvawney to herself, the study of the polite tongue was not resumed with all its former vigor. In spite of her despairing outburst the efforts she was making to straighten out her life were meeting with very tolerable success, for at least there was time to reflect on whither she was drifting. She smiled faintly when she remembered how she had studied Drybone's seamed and time-worn visage only that very day. She knew that Drybone had a family elsewhere, and she under-

stood now how the barrier which neglect and discouragement had raised had gradually become unsurmountable. It seemed likely that her own father had gone through the same experience. But she soon dismissed this train of thought and began to think about the owner of the ranch, for the situation which she knew he was approaching that same day at Bullionfield made her long to help in some more substantial way than merely by filing papers. She was very certain that the connection between the Moab storekeeper and Macklin, the Atlas man, was much less shadowy than Holly seemed to suppose. It seemed illogical that Buckner should turn against the ranchman simply because the latter had been shrewd enough to buy in a poorly considered prospect and promptly turn it into a producing mine. Something more sinister than jealousy lay hidden there, and that part of the girl's daring which was not yet under the ban resolved to find out just what this was.

Rising from her chair, the girl walked to the end of the porch and looked down towards the corral. The pony which Holly had set apart for her use was nosing expectantly across the bars—the road to Moab lay open—why should she not become better acquainted with the wily purveyor of

88 THE DESERT AND MRS. AJAX

groceries? As she stood there thinking, an Indian boy lounged into the corral and presently emerged leading the old piebald that always went for the mail.

Clarice called to the boy and shook her head. "Take him back and saddle Polly instead," she said. "I am going for the mail after this."

CHAPTER V

FORTY miles away over the desert at Bullion-field at this same hour a tall man in khaki stood in its dusty thoroughfare, exchanging news and jocularities with his friends.

With his coming, all work in the Yellow Dog mine, for some occult reason, had suddenly been brought to an end, and mystery and rumor were rampant.

"Macklin's right noisy, Dick," they told him, hardly disguising their anxiety. "That hike East of yours must have cost him considerable more 'high grade' than he likes to lose." And again, "We're hearing that these new-fangled 'apex suits' are mighty stylish for summer wear." All very well in its way, but no man likes to see the prize mine of a boom camp suddenly shut down while he has property to sell—at a fair profit.

"Lumber must be getting high, Dick," they probed. "Your man Wiley has stopped work on the new mill, we see."

"Everything's high—except the Yellow Dog,"

the victim agreed blandly. "And some are saying *that* isn't high enough."

They understood the allusion, for hardly a man of them but had had experience on one side or the other of an apex difficulty much like that now apparently coming up. Holly's claim, with the Atlas parallel to it and above it, lay immediately behind the town, from where the iron-stained outcroppings of the two veins could be seen appearing at intervals above the ground in their courses up the hillside. As Bullionfield prided itself on knowing, the Yellow Dog had been originally opened by a shaft near the highest point of the outcrop and developed to a depth of four hundred feet with what the *Bullionfield Booster* modestly confessed were dazzling results, but while every miner in camp could describe the wonders of the four-hundred-foot level, scarcely a man knew precisely what had happened in the tunnel driven to tap the vein three hundred feet below. Popular opinion, lounging against Bullionfield bars, produced solid arguments to show that the ore shoot had not been found in the tunnel, but, on the other hand, equally solid (or liquid) statements were made that the Atlas vein, dipping into Yellow Dog ground at depth, had proved itself the "mother lode" of the

two veins and so furnished just and righteous cause for injunction and suit. It was true that developments in the Atlas were confined to a sixty-foot shaft and a decrepit windlass, but in view of Holly's silence as to his tunnel, the second theory was steadily gaining ground. And so, while the *Booster's* editor searched feverishly for synonyms for "stupefying" and picking up a blue pencil, wrote, "Beat it to Bullionfield" as a six-inch "head," lip slipped it to lip that old-timer Macklin had Dick Holly cut off at the pockets.

A man parted the swinging doors of a saloon and scrutinized the group as they talked. Presently, he came out with the sidewise shuffle of an aged crab and hurried past as if on important business. He was a thin, stoop-shouldered individual of sixty or more, with a blotched face half hidden by a straggling gray beard. Except for an unpleasantly broken set of teeth and an inflamed eye, he differed in no wise from any of the vague-faced nondescripts that infested the camp, but for a quite sufficient reason the group saw fit to notice his approach. Then their glances with one accord swung around to Holly.

"How are you, Macklin?" the big man remarked blandly. "Pleasant day we're having."

92 THE DESERT AND MRS. AJAX

They watched the old man hurry down the street, and amused themselves again.

"The Stage Office, I reckon."

"No. The freight on Bibles is up again, darn it."

"The Post Office—for a letter!"

"Gosh, no! His girl went back on him in 'eighty-eight."

"Tom Osborn's law shop!"

"Tom's hanging a man in Tuniper to-day."

"THE RED ONION! Oh, Lordy!" they laughed, as the old man obliqued into a saloon.

"All that importance for a drink. Well, that reminds me—But, SAY! You've heard of this 'Drew' business? What about it?"

"*Adios*, boys," said Holly, quickly turning away. "I've got to influence the Sheriff about my taxes."

He didn't want to talk about Danny's end just then. There was no longer any doubt in his own mind but that old Joey Macklin had been responsible for Drew's death, but too much idle talk in the absence of direct proof meant too much money for the Atlas. And also, however much he longed to revenge himself for the cruel work of thirty years ago, the interests of a man soon to reach

Bullionfield from Philadelphia called for business before pleasure. But he felt, nevertheless, that there might be some devious plan by which both of his lawful designs might yet be accomplished and so lounged in his amiable way about the town, searching among the flesh-pots for the Law in Bullionfield.

He found the Sheriff mournfully corroborating the Silver Grill man's statement that the little ball had just dropped into the "Double O."

"There's life for y'u," sighed the investigator, following out into the sunlight. "Y'u fixes your bets so y'u just *can't* lose and then—*bang*—comes the goose-egg."

"Jake," said Holly, in the privacy of the sage-peppered hillside, "who killed Danny Drew?"

"Danny's been dead a long time," Jake answered, without emotion. "Macklin, I reckon—between y'u and me."

"Can you prove it?"

The Sheriff rubbed his grizzled chin and considered.

"Mebbe," said he, and then with judicial appreciation of man's constitutional rights, "mebbe not."

94 THE DESERT AND MRS. AJAX

Holly smiled. He was just in time. Others were planning, too.

"Will you go slow for a while and let *me* prove it?"

The Sheriff cocked a quizzical eyebrow. "They *say* that Atlas is good ground, Dick," he grinned. "I don't mind telling y'u that I've got a man who knowed Drew coming here tu take a look at old Joey. As a clue, it's about as exciting as a drink of water, but it's the only one I've got. He'll pull in yere in about two weeks, I reckon."

"Then you'll hold the dogs off while I make a try?"

By way of answer impartial Justice lost sight in the left eye—and regained it.

The ranchman interposed himself between the Sheriff and the town. "Of course, we haven't quite figured out our first dividend on the Yellow Dog yet," he murmured, "but I've a feeling coming over me that it'll be about a dollar a share."

"I'm real perplexed tu know what that would be on a block of a hundred," the Sheriff murmured dreamily back. "However did I come tu forgit them little shares? Why, I guess I must have lost 'em."

"You'll have a new certificate soon," said Holly, as the dividend was declared.

They approached the town again, and paused before the Hall of Research into Chance.

"I seem to be worrying about that 'mystery' again," the Sheriff said. "I don't feel right about it yet."

"About——"

"That 'Double O,'" replied the Sheriff, and passed from sight.

A few minutes later Holly passed by the watchman whittling away his time on a powder-box at the mouth of the Yellow Dog tunnel and entered the mine office. A shirt-sleeved young man with candle-greased trousers looked up from his figuring amid the blue prints of a draughting-table. "The second sampling figures out a little higher than the first," he said with a happy grin, extending a sheet of calculations. "And that's after leaving out all the rich streaks, too."

"Don't get us overheated, Patterson," was the good-humored reply. "If Wiley has got the cross-cut to that tunnel winze closed up by now, I guess you can let our friend Macklin wander up here. Tell him—tell him I want to talk *business*."

The proprietor of the Red Onion, for the first

96 THE DESERT AND MRS. AJAX

time in months, saw his most promising patron depart from his doors, leaving a perfectly good drink all untouched. Incredulous lips immediately sampled the drink while equally doubtful eyes followed his slow ascent of the Yellow Dog trail in the wake of the young engineer. "I guess I'd better put the bubbles on ice," the Onion man muttered. "Dick Holly's going to buy him out."

Although the ranchman was apparently absorbed in conversation with the tunnel watchman as Macklin drew near he missed few details of the man's face or figure. He was trying to construct a taller man out of that bent shape, trying to clear up the watery eyes and erase the straggling beard and make a flat, thick-lipped face with high cheekbones out of one which whisky had thinned and hollowed. But while he failed to satisfy himself thus of the identity he found other means equally good, for he suddenly began to interpret the look which he had always seen in the old man's eyes. He saw now that not only did the other know him as the boy of long ago whom he had left stranded on the desert, but he had always known him.

"Macklin," said the ranchman, "do you remember the offer I made you six months ago?"

"Y'u kin bet I do, Mister Good-player," was the ready response. "And it warn't very high at that. 'Twas fifty thousand dollars."

"Not quite," corrected Holly. "Forty—if I recollect. But now I've decided to make you a new offer."

"Yes?"

"Yes," said the ranchman dryly. "I'll give you fifteen."

The other's jaw dropped and he fell back a step.

"What do you mean?" he rasped angrily. "Did y'u bring me 'way up here for a joke?"

Holly raised an interrupting hand. "Perhaps the joke is on both of us, Joey," he said. "Did you ever see what happened to our vein on the seven hundred? Light up a candle and come in."

With a puzzled look on his face, the old man took a candle out of the watchman's box and followed Holly. That he was now being urged to enter what he had previously been shut out from gave him food for thought. Only one thing could account for such a remarkable reversal. And if there was something radically wrong with the Yel-

low Dog, there was probably something wrong with the Atlas, too.

Near the breast of the tunnel, some nine hundred feet in by Macklin's mental count, the ranchman stopped and raised his candle above his head with a significant gesture, and at the front itself he climbed the heap of rubble and held the light close to the rock.

"Do you get me, Macklin?" he said, while he watched the other closely. "Do you blame me now for changing my bid? She's not only petered out, but she's all shot to pieces and faulted clear to Glory! Look at that front! 'Foot' and 'hanging' all run together like a scrambled egg! Your world beater of an Atlas mine isn't worth two rubber nickels below the six-hundred-foot level, or this one either. How about that 'law-suit' *now?*"

The old man stood staring and silent. Too much of a miner not to read the unmistakable signs of a "fault" he knew instinctively that the Atlas vein, only a few hundred feet away through the rock, had probably undergone the same displacement. While the vein in either case could doubtless be found again in time, yet the rich pay-shoots of the upper levels undoubtedly came to

a very definite end near where they stood in the murky tunnel.

Irresolute and disconcerted, fully aware that the value of the Atlas both as a producer and an "apex" mine had suddenly taken a sickening drop, the old man stood with his dripping candle held above his head, mumbling profanity through his beard and searching for some sign to which he could pin a desperate hope.

The flickering flame threw queer shadows on the gaunt face, spotting it with high lights as does a campfire after dark, snatching the years away to put coarse young manhood in their place, then doubly aging its wrinkles with senile evils. The light fell on the slack mouth and wavering chin, dropped to the wasted neck and talon-like hand where a heavy gold ring glittered, then shone, full and yellow, on the bared arm from which the sleeve had fallen away.

The ranchman saw the sleeve fall—and clicked his teeth together. Flatwheel had been right. He snuffed out his candle between finger and thumb.

"I'm making you a very fair offer," he said, out of the darkness. "Nobody knows about this fault except a few—and we are looking to keep it

quiet. Probably you will, too. Of course, you can try to sell out to some tenderfoot for a bigger price, but I guess I can get to him before all the papers are signed. Perhaps, in that case, he would not be enthusiastic with the coin. Now—you have got a little ore up above—*perhaps*—and I am giving you a chance to sell it. Make up your mind and let me know inside of two weeks—not a day later.”

As the other only nodded vacantly, Holly touched him on the arm and started for the outer air. “Look and sample all you like,” he said. “I’m going out—I can’t stand it. It’s just the same as if I’d been walking along to my wedding some nice bright day and all of a sudden I came across my best man lying out in the brush, *cold*,—shot, maybe—*shot in the back*—well, *you* know how it is.”

The other man’s candle slipped from his fingers and went out in the broken rock underfoot. “I’ll come, too,” he muttered. “I feel like I needed a drink.”

At the tunnel’s mouth they parted company, and the old man picked his way down the trail to the Red Onion and the town.

“What was it he said about a felluh being

shot?" he mused suspiciously. "He's hard tu savey. And who'd a-thought he'd grow up so from such a kid? I didn't feel just right in there with him. I should have took another drink afore I went up. But now is just as good," he reflected happily, and passed inside.

"Well?" queried the anxious owner of the Onion. "What did he say? Will he buy? Did he talk turkey?"

The old man poured calmly and smacked his lips with due deliberation. "If y'u want tu call it that," he remarked scornfully, as he picked out a comfortable chair and retired behind a newspaper. "He offered me a measly hundred thousand and I threw him down."

That afternoon a new face showed itself among the habitués of the Onion. He was a miner like the others, a person with a sociable smile and pleasing carelessness as to money. Someone said that he'd once been a drill-runner in Holly's tunnel, at which remark the Atlas man, hunched up over a painfully penciled letter to one Buckner, at Moab, raised a calculative eye and decided to make the newcomer's acquaintance. Which particular thing was precisely what the drill-runner had been instructed to accomplish.

And so the day ended, with a beginning made and a little more known and another one of Holly's tunnel workers cashing a pink check at the "New York Store" and fitting out "for a little prospecting."

CHAPTER VI

HOME again, and down by the corral, the ranchman was unhitching his tired pair in the darkness. He had crossed the desert without water in the heat of the day, the center of a pall of alkali dust which had drifted back and forth all day long between the rear wheels and his horses' ears. The fine white powder lay thick on his hat-brim and gritted between his teeth, and when he had turned his animals loose he knelt by an irrigating ditch and washed his parched mouth free.

The ranch-house lay quiet and vague against the purple foothills. Above it the plume-like poplars swayed gently across the last yellow-shot horizon light. At his feet the dark water churked and gurgled. In the silent dusk about him he heard the first of the mysterious night noises, the faint cries of the tired insect world, the drowsy cheep of a bird teetering on a limb, the croak of a tree-toad grateful for the cool night wind on his back. The scent of honeysuckle came down the wind and he thought of the vine which clung outside the office-window.

He began to rehearse again the rôle he had morbidly planned during his lonely ride that day. He had already divined the kind of man she would eventually marry. Probably he would be a trim, brisk, city man with a prosperous business, perhaps some hustling young merchant back in Salt Lake. There would be a stone house up on the hill near the Eagle Gate (with only a small mortgage on it), and she would wear long, sweeping trains to her dresses and carry a lace parasol. Yes. Even though these had gone out of style she should have them. *That* was a very small thing to insist on. She was not to grow any taller with marriage (after some troubled thought) but was to fill out sufficiently so that when she rode by in her carriage she would be noticed for her striking beauty. She was to move quietly about in her church and social circles, making lifelong friends wherever she went, through her tact and—well—her quickness at figures.

As he neared the house he patiently reviewed the whole miserable horoscope,—then saw he had omitted something. It was not fitting that she and the young merchant should always live alone. The inevitable consequences must be considered. Well,

there was no use putting it off. There would be a perfect raft of——

A faint sound came to him out of the darkness. A luminous white figure peered at him uncertainly across the shadowy fence. The gate swung open.

"I hoped it might be you," a voice said with a glad, warm note. "Welcome home, Mr. Holly."

Something inside of poor Dick Holly seemed to cease its beating. After a few æons, however, its action resumed, and he felt the blood rushing back into his face. The world was moving on again.

"Everything O.K.?" he stammered, his careful rôle blown away—erased—forgotten. *Queer* how glad the desert made you to see people again! So she had been thinking about him, after all! Queerer still! Had she heard his question? He was not quite sure that he had spoken aloud. But perhaps he had better first return the hand he found himself holding with the clutch of a drowning man. For one wild moment he threw discretion to the winds and madly hungered to catch her in his arms. Here in the fragrant darkness were the time and place—his heart went out with a leap to her who was the girl.

He stepped forward and laid his hand on her bare arm, resting on the fence-top. The arm was not withdrawn, though it quivered. For an instant he felt her eyes flash at him through the darkness—then he lost their light. The soft, warm, rounded wrist he held grew softer, less resentful. He heard her draw a quivering breath—saw the other hand raised to hide her face.

"Little girl—little girl!" he whispered. In spite of his vow he was about to stake all his worldly happiness, like any gambler, upon this single throw.

Then came sounds from the house—the light from a door flung open. Others were coming. He would be seen. He drew back instantly.

Released, the white figure turned and sped up the path. His chance—the chance he would never allow himself again—had flown. And with it poor Dick Holly saw the last years of his youth also vanish.

In spite of his hidden agonies he followed in, after an interval, and came upon the family.

Under the light of the center-lamp Mr. Scanlan Blondelli, absorbed in calculations, was breathing hard over a problem having a pig as the unknown quantity. On the other side of the table Alta-

mont, in spectacles, was methodically reading the Dictionary, his markers showing that he had progressed as far as "Cat to Catapult." Facing each other at opposite ends of the sofa Mrs. Ajax and Mr. Peters, who seemed to be renewing his youth, sat thoroughly at ease.

"And you say you were once a *really* Mormon?" Imogene was asking in awed tones.

"Just in my *mind*, I was," Mr. Peters explained with a deprecatory cough, while he crossed his bony knees and rolled his eyes ceilingwards. "I figgered I could be as Mormonish as I pleased that-a-way. Y'u see, if y'u believe, why y'u *believe*—but if y'u don't *tell* anybody y'u don't have tu pay anything in tu the Tithing House."

"Tell me more about it," said Imogene, settling back to give the matter undivided attention. "Ever since I papered this room with little blue boats floating round in lakes of mayonnaise sauce and hid up your friend 'Nephi' I've felt sort of guilty that we haven't any religion sticking around. Too much meat in these hot climates ain't good so far away from a church. The only trouble is, I don't know just what to settle on. Episcopal is lovely, but snobby—and nobody's *ever* sick, so we couldn't be Christian Scientists."

"Oh, don't let's be Scientists," objected Cobrita, who was combing out a fat, white dog with one hand while she played checkers with the other. "They're always saying 'manifestation of error' when you know perfectly well it was that second piece of mince. Make Drybone convert us. *Come on! Let's be Mormons!*"

"I'd just as lieve," said Harry across the checker-board.

"No, sirree, you won't," retorted his fiancée. "But you can be a Baptist if you like."

"What—in a desert—twenty miles between water-holes?" asked Harry doubtfully.

"There's a whole lot more tu it than y'u would figger," Drybone stated defensively. "From what the Bishop of Bull Valley Stake's Second Counselor told me I should say it *offered* more than most any religion I know. He said that any time I felt my abominations risin' up fer tu choke me off from my crowns, tu send him word by a Piute, and he'd ride over and help me wrastle Satan."

"But what is it that they offer?" asked Cobrita, curious and cautious.

"*Everything*," responded Drybone, with a

strange facial contortion; "everything y'u want—in the *future life*."

A puff of honeysuckle-sweetened air pulsed in at a window and, with a far-away look in her eyes, a slim, white figure slipped out of the room to a corner of the moonlit veranda, only to encounter there one surnamed Richard. Within, the voices of the seekers after Truth murmured on in a confused drone, which rose to a clamor only when Drybone perpetrated a fresh outrage.

"I suppose Imogene is about right," the man said uncertainly, when he saw he could not well withdraw. "We are probably a sinful lot. And yet it does seem hard to be bad on a desert—with no one else around. I guess a Nevada ranch would make a good summer resort for the Recording Angel—he could rest here undisturbed, and pick up a little confidence again. But it might be too lonely for him, after all. Probably he would get the *loco*."

"What is the *loco*?" the girl asked simply.

The man put his whims away and searched his memory.

"It seems to come from silence—or heat—or thirst or loneliness," he said thoughtfully. "It's a kind of insanity, I suppose. Sometimes it's vio-

lent, and yet at other times violence would be your worst enemy. It only comes to you on the desert. Young men get it from taking long chances against the sun, or too much whisky. Old men get it from moping over things they did once, or more often *didn't* do. It makes you like the sun and the sand and the silent places because you hate everything else in the world and yourself worst of all."

"What a very horrible thing," the girl responded in a troubled voice. She saw now that the great gray stretches she had often crossed in the train might have another meaning than that of a passing interval of dust and discomfort. Even the soft-hued basin below the ranch began to take on a disturbing form. Perhaps those glorious crimson buttes which flamed across the valley each morning at her window had a sterner message to convey. As she saw the face opposite grow grave she knew that while the desert had given this man of its bounty, yet he had never underestimated its dangers. As he spoke, it assumed the shape of a slow, implacable enemy—he seemed to consider it an almost personal foe. His voice dropped to a lower key. He began to tell a story.

THE DESERT AND MRS. AJAX 111

"A few years ago a man with a pair of burros came through here from Moab and stopped for a day to rest. He was a thin, stoop-shouldered man, with a brown mustache and hollow cheeks. He wore gold-rimmed spectacles and coughed a good deal. He looked like a locksmith, out of a job. He sat there on the steps all one morning and told me his story.

"He said he'd been peddling a patent mouse-trap at back-doors in Kansas and Nebraska for some months past, but hadn't done much. He said that a man had told him about this Western country and he'd decided to come out here and try mining. And so he'd come, riding the rods and the blind baggage and walking, so as to save his money.

"I asked him what a vein looked like, but he couldn't exactly tell. He only said he knew he'd know one if he saw it.

"I noticed that he kept saying that he had to *hurry*. 'I've got to hurry,' he'd say. 'My wife and daughter, now—they ain't very well fixed. It'll take more than a mouse-trap *this* time, the way I'm feeling. I've got to find a *mine*.'

"I tried to get him to look around over in the Silver Mountain country where there's more

water than there is here—but he wouldn't do it. You see, he was a city fellow.

“ ‘I'm going to try this Amargosa Desert,’ he said, coughing and squinting up at me with a wise look. ‘I've been studying it out on my little map and it don't look as if there was anyone there.’

“ ‘No. They came back. *A few stayed,*’ I said.

“ ‘Oh! *Did* they?’ he said, brightening up. ‘Then maybe I'll meet 'em down there.’

“Before he went I took the name of the town where his family lived. Of course, I ought to have done something more than that, but I didn't. You see, I was foolish. I was letting his sureness about things make me mad.

“Two months afterwards he came back and I found him filling up at the ditch. He was tuckered out. He'd lost both his burros and had come it alone the last week. But he said he'd located his claims just the same, and gave me the notices to have recorded for him. They were strung out along a big, red vein on the side of a blue mountain. You could see the vein for miles and miles, he said.

“I took a look at his samples. They were porphyry—just plain, ordinary porphyry. I did-

n't say much. I asked him how he lost his burros. He looked at me in a queer way and then he whispered that they'd been taken up to Heaven harnessed to a chariot of fire.

"Of course, *then* I ought to have understood. I ought to have watched the poor fellow. I ought to have taken care of him. But I didn't. Instead, I sat down on that fallen cottonwood by the corral and started to read his notices. You see, I was mighty mean—for the second time. And while I was sitting there he crept up behind and convinced me of it. They said he used a stick of wood——"

"Oh!" gasped Clarice. "Did he really try to kill you? Didn't it hurt terribly?"

"Yes. It hurt," he admitted frankly. "But it hurt more the next day—out in the sun—when we were following him."

"You mean—he ran away."

"Yes, ma'am—walked and ran. He got as far as the Dry Lake—that's forty miles. He didn't know where he was going, or why. I guess he was figuring that he had to 'hurry.'"

Holly began to pause between his sentences. He puffed hard on his cigar. "We knew pretty well how it would be long before we came up with him.

114 THE DESERT AND MRS. AJAX

Along about evening we found a shirt—and then a pair of shoes. A mile or so farther on we picked up his overalls. Perhaps we wouldn't have found him even then if it hadn't been for the Lake. It was nice and smooth there. We could see from the marks where he lay that he'd stopped to dance."

Holly shook his head and puffed out his cheeks. "HOH!" he said, and threw the cigar away into the darkness. "It was pretty bad."

With her dark head laid against a pillar, the girl stared out in the direction of the vague, violet plain. The moonlight fell whitely across her face, adding soft curves to her cheek and fresh young lips and glistening liquidly in her eyes. Still under the spell of the sober voice she was constructing the scene for herself, peopling the veiled desert with strange, tragic figures.

She seemed to be down there, where *he* had been, in the gray-green waste, where the dust-whirls reeled to and fro, but only as the spectator of activities in some cruel dream. As if she were standing on the edge of a stage, she saw the figures passing, the scenes shifting.

She was conscious of a world flooded with heat which refracted on her from every angle.

Hot and glaring, the red-banded buttes moved into their places. Overhead, an infinite blue dome crackled and twinkled. A choke of dust came up in her throat, and she felt the poignant sting of cactus against her feet. Like a breath from a furnace a hot wind puffed up and seared her cheek. Far off in the purple lap of the ranges a dry lake glittered with malignant enchantment.

Across this scene came men, bronzed and furrow-faced. Noiselessly stooping and searching, rising again to peer from under their sheltering hands at the footprints in the alkaline crust, they as silently flitted away again.

And now, in their place, crawling covertly through the sage brush on its hands and knees, came a fearful figure. Sanity had long since departed from the eyes which burned out of the blackened face but, for that matter, neither was there any despair,—unless animals despair. Disheveled, inhuman, the man rose to his feet and glared about him. His thickened tongue lolled from his mouth, his eyes were wild and bloodshot. His cracked lips, drawn tight against the gums, were parted in a perpetual snarl.

The shimmer of the lake attracted him and he stared blankly at the deception, not deigning to

shield his eyes. Then a last flicker of intelligence passed through his mind. He seemed to co-ordinate his thirst with the distant prospect. He threw up his arms, with a croaking shout, and rushed forward.

A grotesque shape flitted across the yellow floor of the lake. Smirking and posturing in naked contentment, it danced in jiggling silhouette against the eye of the sun. Here it spun wildly and there it glided with mincing step until, after a time, it tired of play—and laid itself down, its head on its arms—to rest from dancing—until the morrow.

And always before her, through the long, hot day, a grim-visaged man rode on horseback, a crimsoned bandage about his head.

"And yet I like it," the girl said in a low voice. "To me, the desert seems to suit two kinds of people—very little ones who like to grow smaller—and very big ones, who only grow bigger. I don't know which I am, but I like it, anyway. And I'm not afraid."

She paused and turned her soft-eyed look.

"What became of the man's family?"

Holly stirred uneasily.

"The mother wrote after a while," he replied

briefly, almost curtly, when it was plain that he must answer. "They were going back East—to some friends of theirs, she said."

"Back *East!*" the girl repeated in a frightened whisper. "Why, isn't this a curious story! *Where* in the East?"

"Illinois, if I remember." He seemed averse to saying more.

"But they had no means," Clarice objected, and absorbed his vision with her own. A thrill shot through her, tingling out to her extremities. As if she were at a play, she began to see the curtain stealing up on a drama with an unsuspected caste.

"Perhaps someone bought the claims," he offered vaguely, helplessly.

"*Who* bought the claims?" persisted the frowning girl.

"Drybone, I understand," he answered brazenly, and then as suddenly quailed. "But perhaps some fellow loaned him the money."

"I am certain of it," the girl replied and looked away. When had there been a man like this, and what did his story mean? There had been a time in the long ago, she remembered, when her mother had somehow acquired means to pay their

118 THE DESERT AND MRS. AJAX

debts and take them away from their Western home, but was it possible that there was a connection between these two things? Her eyes dropped to the heavy yellow ring on her hand and she fell to turning it nervously round her finger. Puzzled and upset, with the old discontent over her unsatisfactory antecedents in no way lessened by this dreadful possibility, she raised her eyes to his—and was shocked by the sudden change in his face.

He was staring open-mouthed at the ring on her finger, his hand going out towards hers with an impulsive movement—an inarticulate sound of dismay in his throat. The surprise which was written in every feature seemed to verge on horror. The girl felt as if his convulsive movement had been to clutch her back from some unseen danger. Then the look passed and he drew back into the shadow, too late, however, to prevent her reading what had passed through his mind.

Clarice felt her heart grow icy cold. Just as clearly as if he had taken the mate to her ring from his pocket and told her whose hand had worn it, she knew why that look of dismay and dread had fastened itself on his face. The man

of the story told in an idle moment for her diversion, the vague-ideaed searcher for the rainbow's pot of gold, the crazed figure of the dry lake, the man who had crept up behind another with a stick of wood, had been the one who was going to make her new hopes in life secure.

There was no need to puzzle over his sudden silence now. Somewhere in the story's telling the puzzle had pieced itself together for him after all these years, and immediately the wonderful kindness that seemed to detect pain as quickly as a mother, had been wrapped around her to shield her from further distress. Probably he was right in not telling more—he was right in most things. If he thought there was nothing to be gained by more disclosures she would abide by his judgment.

With her mind filled with anguish, the girl wondered how it all would end. And this illimitable bounty, on which they all existed, and which she had been trying to return as well as she might, now held her the more firmly in its debt, for it had been begun when she was only a child. A spasm of helplessness before such undefiable forces crossed her face. Despondency began to clutch again at her heart.

But during the short moment while the girl's startled eyes enveloped his, Dick Holly's thoughts were racing down another channel. Of the two he was the more distressed, for he remembered only too well who had worn the mate to the ring glittering before him in the moonlight. The fact that nothing was known about the man only made matters worse. Macklin was said to carry the miner's card of a Colorado "local," but none of the Cripple Creekers knew him, and the Butte men likewise shook their heads. He had left no tangible impress on the Desert in spite of the fact that he and Drew had been prospectors together, for he had no friends among those coming from down Searchlight way, nor from the copper mines of the Salt Lake Basin. While it seemed well-nigh impossible that the teamster of those many years gone by could ever have become the father of the sweet-eyed girl beside him, yet Dick Holly could not omit it from his calculations.

He could see, now, that his plans were going to face right about. There was no time for paying off old grudges while this girl's happiness lay in the balance. Macklin would have to be got out of the country and it would have to be done

quickly. Two weeks gave him little enough time as it was, and when the Sheriff once took hold of the case no favors would be asked or granted. If Jake had the evidence, Atlas or no Atlas, friends or no friends, the man who had shot Danny Drew in the back would be hanged as high as Haman.

Sitting there in the shadow and half-ashamed to read in her pitifully strained face a belief which he could not remove, he felt a wave of compassion sweep over him. He managed an approach to her along the railing. To-morrow would be another day, as the Mexicans said. Time enough then for the work in hand. Just now he meant to cheer her up.

"About that Polly horse you mostly ride," he began. "I've been thinking lately it would feel a lot better if it belonged just to you. These ranch-hands sometimes teach a young horse bad tricks. It would be safer if you'd take her for your really own."

"No, thank you," said Clarice.

"*Ma'am!*" he ejaculated blankly.

"*No, thank you!*" the girl repeated. The soft white throat that he could see so well in the moonlight began to work as if something were hard to

swallow. Her full lower lip was quivering helplessly. "I can't take her—I can't take your pony. I mean I could, but I *won't!* You give away *everything*," she said hotly, with brimming eyes. "You just give and give and *give*. And all *we* do is live here on your money. I won't do it any longer."

"Why, I didn't want to *sell* the little horse," he said despairingly. "I just wanted to loan her away for keeps where she'd have good——"

"Treatment," supplied Clarice, with a choke. "From a cheap acrobat!"

There was no coquetry in the tones. The words had been meant to cut and hurt. With a complete reversal of feeling the girl was now insulting the very pride which had made her refuse his gift. It was a drastic method of preventing further offerings, perhaps, but not so illogical as may seem. The truth was that Clarice had come to feel herself at a hopeless disadvantage.

Just when or whence had come this fearful thing some people called Love, but which the girl thought was closer to Anguish, she did not know. It had crept upon her insidiously, undermining the barrier of her reserve, less by one swift assault than by a multitude of approaches through dis-

used fields, and now that its meaning was revealed she suddenly weakened and retreated before what she thought was an immensely superior force. In effect, Clarice, having fallen in love, was passing through the tortures of self-depreciation, not lessened by the knowledge which she had gained in the few moments past.

Sick with the tumult of her feelings, the girl tried to think of some means of escape, but since cold-blooded flight was impossible, she could only keep her eyes turned away. The blood surged hotly into her cheeks as the idiocy of her last remark quickly came back to her. She could see now that all was over. She would have none but herself to blame if she lost his respect by throwing away her own. Apparently her best endeavors to be sincere and womanly were to be thwarted, after all, by this vice of her nature which had so surprisingly blossomed forth. Then she stole a look at his face and saw that he was only badly puzzled.

"But I'll take care of her, *myself*," he was saying. "Those *acrobats* have got their hands full now. You can ride her just as hard as you like—don't worry about treatment. Why, I'll feed Polly and water her with my own hands. I'll

124 THE DESERT AND MRS. AJAX

build a separate corral for her, too, so she won't get kicked. *Now* will you take her?"

The girl's pulse gave a quick throb. Not only had he ceased to connect her, except vaguely, with the circus, but that which she had feared most, the man with the stick of wood, seemed to have been thrust angrily out of mind as quickly as he had come in. Perhaps there would be a chance for her yet! It was hard for the redoubtable Blondellis to be classed as "cheap acrobats," but there would be no explanations now. Up, Eros! Down, Mars! Pride had some rights, after all.

"Yes! Yes! I'll take Polly," she gasped, still a little afraid her sin would find her out. "Drybone says I can go down on the flat with them to-morrow and watch them catch wild horses."

"Catch one yourself," he urged. "You're a born rider. You'd make a good *vaquero*."

Her eyes kindled. She *was* a good rider, she knew, and the spice of danger she had scented was calling. But she only smiled wisely and shook her sleek head. No more of the old life for Clarice—nor of anything that savored of it. No more of taking chances. God willing, she was going to be a lady—as her mother had been.

Once more the soft darkness wrapped them round, and in the silence her delicious nearness and the scent of honeysuckle which seemed her own, worked their spell.

Once more Dick Holly forgot the years and his eyes yearned and yearned at her out of his beseeching face, and his hand stole nearer till it covered her own.

Drawn by his power, the sweet dark eyes rose at last to his, though her cheek had mantled with a burning tide. So close were they that for him, the whole world of sight and sound seemed to fade away and leave only a perfect silence—with her still more perfect face and soft mouth helpless before his own.

Yet it was not to be, and in another moment he had controlled himself. The sound of the telephone bell in the office had come to them, and before he knew it the exquisite flower of her lips and the soft cheek and lovely, supple body existed no more for him on that moon-enchanted veranda than in a vanished dream.

"A telegram from Philadelphia," he heard her voice repeating. "Very well, I'm ready," and her pencil began to move across the pad on her table.

126 THE DESERT AND MRS. AJAX

"Will reach Ami on the tenth with wife, son, niece, and four trunks. Can you meet us?"

"OSGOOD WARDER."

"*Great Grief!*" ejaculated the ranchman, coming into the room with distress in every feature. "And we were all so happy!"

CHAPTER VII

"OSGOOD," said Mrs. Warder speculatively, "do you really suppose J. Gardner Paul would have loaned us his private car now that you've taken his asphalt bonds back again?"

"Possibly—possibly," her husband replied, with the glint of an eye from under his traveling-cap. "But what's the matter with existing accommodations, Charlotte? Do you really think that *chêf* that J.'s so chesty about would do any better by us than these Afro-Pullmans? I don't know how *you* feel about it, but *I* think this observation platform is just about *right*," with which remark Warder père unbuttoned his vest and stretched out a prehensile foot for a campstool.

His wife adjusted her glasses, with their pendent gold chain, and peered anxiously at her husband. Something akin to despair settled on her full, gray face, with its double chin. Fatal evidence was accumulating that Warder père had decided to like the free-and-easy West. In Denver he had cut squarely across the canons of fashion in a black silk shirt. In the Royal Gorge, he had per-

sistently chummed with a brakeman. The brakeman knew how high everything was, and where it flowed after it left here, and the approximate tonnage—for which certainly useless information he had been given an unnecessary quantity of cigars. To make matters worse, her husband had totally disappeared in Salt Lake City for several anxious hours, and had finally been detected standing on the curbstone shamelessly eating things out of *a paper bag*! Later on, he was discovered absorbing knowledge along the streets from tan-faced persons with undignified felt hats, standing with feet wide-spread and thumbs hooked in his vest, saying, “Well, well! You certainly surprise me! I confess I had no idea——”

But the defection of the Warder family, unfortunately, had not ended there, for Biddle Warder had disappeared into the chair-car ahead that morning and refused to come out. It was not quite clear to his mother as to what Biddle had found there, but Amy Radnor had been approached on one of the station platforms by a frank young person, with an all-too-perfect coiffure, who was on her way to Portlandoregon to be married *at once* to a very rich lumberman, and did Amy think that Eastern men were quite sincere? Upon

Amy's nervously expressed belief in male sincerity the thankful young person had kissed her twice, pressed half a sticky orange into her hand, introduced her to three perfect gentlemen in the boot-and-shoe line and joyously re-entered the chair-car. The boot-and-shoe men had later endeavored to force a passage through to Amy's section, but had been repulsed with slaughter.

"Osgood," said his wife, with a touch of solemnity, "do you realize that we have not seen a copy of *The Ledger* since we left Jenkin-town?"

"Good job, too," her husband replied unfeelingly, and puffed cigar-smoke from the corner of his mouth. "You read too much—we all read too much. You don't catch these chaps out here doing it. By George!" he exclaimed enthusiastically. "Isn't that a splendid sight over there? See that bright red hill backed up against a purple mountain! Sniff that air, Charlotte? A fellow told me we'd be up six thousand feet by noon!"

Osgood Warder crossed his feet on the campstool and settled back to solid enjoyment. The feet were entirely comfortable in soft, square-toed Oxfords and loose, white socks, and his cigar

was the best his club could supply. The air about him was redolent with an exhilarating, woody scent that seemed to mingle its tonic with his blood. He had not felt so blissfully juvenile in years.

He was a white-haired, florid little man and rather square and chunky, with a protuberance immediately below the belt-line, such as might have been caused by swallowing a large-sized canteloupe. His eye was a reserved, almost dull, blue and occasionally he had only a firm slit for a mouth. Somehow, one knew that his associates in business would also be stout and pinkly groomed. They would be mask-faced men, with difficult eyes, experts in "coalers" and the necessary politics, who pushed buttons in flat-topped desks and "affixed" signatures. They, also, would have slits for mouths.

But with it all there was a decidedly saving sense of humor in Osgood Warder, and a surfeit of one kind of life, for he was now evincing an interest in how the other fellow "made it." Although perfectly immune in the long run to anything but the deadly certain manipulations of his own clique, he was taking a chortling, boyish delight in a few harmless speculations. As to his venture in Yel-

low Dog stock, a very few minutes' attention to the ranchman's arguments had convinced him that here was a winning chance, and he was now on his half-amused way to see where he had put his money.

"I'm very glad you like the scenery, my dear," his wife remarked. "Probably it reminds you of something—I think most things do. Does this gold-mine person live all alone on his farm?"

"All alone," her husband replied. "I believe he *did* say something about 'Indians,' but I didn't pay much attention to it."

"Of course not, dear," his wife retorted tremulously. "*You* were thinking only about *gold*. It will be necessary for *me* to think about the Indians!"

"I understand they're not bad in summer," was the quizzical reply. "Better not imagine too many difficulties, Charlotte. He'll probably make us very comfortable."

"I fear it will be a rough and savage life," his wife said despairingly. "I hope that Amy realizes by this time what is expected of her."

"GREAT SCOTT!" exclaimed Warder, with a choke. "Is *that* why you brought her?"

"*Why not?*" asked Mrs. Warder stonily.

"Amy's a nobody—and *she's twenty-nine!* Sometimes I wish other people saw things as clearly as I do. Have you any well thought out plan for marrying Amy off to anyone, Osgood?"

"N-no," he confessed, and rubbed his nose.

"I can frankly say I have not."

"Well," said his wife, "*I have.*"

At this juncture their niece appeared, a pretty but painfully thin brunette, with intelligent dark eyes and a mobile face. As she did not lack the self-effacing air of the poor relation, it was hard to imagine so much intelligence furnishing a very heavy cross for anyone to bear. She seemed to be the type of physiqueless but interesting girl doomed to go through life carrying an old lady's shawl, and yearned after by romantic, poor young men who always looked back but never followed.

On her heels came Biddle Warder, well-dressed, young, and confident; not lacking in fresh good looks or in brusque determination to have whatever he principally wanted in this world. Biddle had been in business with his father for about six months, during which time his stenographer had ridden home regularly thrice a week on the rear platform of the tube train so as not to proclaim her tears.

THE DESERT AND MRS. AJAX 133

The young man brushed by his cousin rather rudely and dropped into a chair by his father's side. It was evident to the women, from Biddle's cold, forceful air, that he was about to talk "business."

"I've just been talking to a mining man I met in the car ahead," he said into the parental ear, "and it looks to me as if he had a pretty good thing. I told him we'd lately gone into mining, and finally persuaded him to tell me about it.

"It seems that he's been working for years and years on a machine for *concentrating* gold, and just got it perfected—last week, I think he said. It's what he calls a 'dry' concentrator, suitable for just such regions as this. He says he got the idea when he saw so many Easterners with money coming out here to take up these properties and develop them the way they really ought to be developed. I must say, it seems like a rather costly affair. He put the price sky-high at first, but I jewed him down a lot, let me state. Finally, he said he'd make us one of these machines for ten thousand dollars—a thousand dollars down and a thousand every thirty days——"

"WHAT'S THAT?" barked his father,

hastily waking up at the mention of money. "When will he deliver? After the first thousand—or the last?"

"I don't know that I heard him say," his son replied, conscious that perhaps he had missed a point.

"They generally *don't*," Warder remarked succinctly. "It sounds like a stand-and-deliver proposition. You *stand* until he wants to deliver. Just how did this wonderful machine work? Did he see fit to disclose its operations?"

"Oh, yes," said Biddle eagerly. "He drew me a picture of it. It's certainly a very complicated thing—a crushing apparatus on top—and motors—and a lot of screens and belts and chutes. He explained it to some sheep men, too, who all believed in it."

"Oh! They did?" and a satirical light glittered in the elder's eye. "I *thought* it sounded like some kind of a separator."

"That's it," his son said eagerly. "It's really an electric separator. It sifts out the gold and makes it stick on a belt."

"I didn't know you could attract gold," Warder objected doubtfully.

"But he says *he* can," the enthusiastic Biddle retorted. "He says it's merely a question of magnetism."

"Now I feel sure of it," was his father's reply, as he replaced his feet on the comfortable campstool. "He will attract his gold as formerly—by *personal* magnetism. You didn't sign anything, I hope?"

"W-e-e-l-l," faltered the young man, "I bought an option on his first machine for a hundred dollars."

The train now climbed over the rim of the basin and dropped swiftly down into a bigger, grayer desert than any that had gone before. On the far-off slopes of the foothills they saw white mine-dumps, or a bare-boarded bunk-house marooned on a treeless mountain-side. They flashed by sidings where cars of ore stood waiting, and saw loads of unfamiliar machinery lying on sun-bleached platforms. A flock of sheep fled bleating away over the plain, and they glimpsed the herders, knee-deep in the greasewood, staring silently at the train, while the dogs rounded up the animals.

"Gold Center, next," said someone, and they searched anxiously for the metropolis. It con-

sisted of some tentative streets, a water-tank, a store, and two saloons. Prominent in the landscape was a twenty-foot board sign, mounted on two posts, "BUY A LOT IN GOLD CENTER."

"How very silly," Mrs. Warder remarked peevishly. "A lot of *what*, may I ask? And there isn't any!"

"Ami, next," the brakeman announced from the car-door. "It's going to be hot, folkses. This country would make Phil Sheridan think Texas was a cold-storage warehouse."

The passengers arose and assembled their luggage. In the interval of waiting, Miss Radnor found her aunt seated in stiff readiness on the edge of her section, a look of unusual pensiveness on her heavy face.

"It has seemed so very strange. I fear I shall never become used to it," she was saying, half to herself.

"You mean, Aunt Charlotte——"

"To find so many people living so far from Philadelphia," her aunt replied.

But there were stranger things yet to happen, for during the long drive to the ranch Mrs. Warder elicited some startling information from the

man whom her short-sighted husband had carelessly taken as a partner.

As they first sighted the ranch-house from the desert below Mrs. Warder was heard to believe that life there would prove rather dreary. Holly thought of the ex-Pilkingtons and smiled.

"You see, ma'am, there are more than two of us now. There's my secretary, for one."

"Ah, yes. A young man to keep the books."

"Well, not quite," he confessed. "He—it—she's a young lady. She's very quick at figures," he added, as if to ameliorate a condition that, for the first time, seemed to require defense.

"Are there *others?*" asked Mrs. Warder in a curious tone which her family recognized as her "Associated Charities voice."

"Yes," he admitted. "There's the cook. She's a lady, too."

Mrs. Warder's eyelids rose and fell over a swift glance at her niece. The ranchman saw the look and grew troubled.

"There's still another lady," he said doggedly. "I don't know her last name, but she has *snakes.*" He began to feel distressed and an unstified yelp of laughter from Biddle didn't help matters.

"Are these *all?*" asked Mrs. Warder so coolly

138 THE DESERT AND MRS. AJAX

that her husband waggled his hand at her, behind his back.

Holly saw his chance and gulped down his wrath.

"No, ma'am," he answered. "There are also two Italians who are Irishmen."

Mrs. Warder's lip drooped, then rose as if to form the word "SIR!"

"No more, I hope," laughed Warder père, faintly perplexed but genial. "My cigars won't hold out."

The ranchman's smile was slow but reassuring.

"We're safe," he said. "The Missing Link doesn't smoke."

When, some time later, Mrs. Warder paused at the door of the room to which she had been guided, she found Amy Radnor close behind her, and a look from the older woman was enough to bring the girl into the room.

"Lock the door securely, Amy," said her aunt, feeling for her hatpins and looking about for a mirror. "I have something to say to you."

Amy scrutinized the door. "There isn't any lock," she said.

"Then I shall say it, anyway," her aunt announced. "Please help me off with my boots, and

look in the inside, flap-pocket of the black Steigerwalt hand-bag and see if you can find the key to my trunk. I'm sure I can't conceive how the trunk got up here. Did you see any of the men bringing it up?"

"I—I think it was carried up by a *woman*," Amy faltered, hesitating on her knees before two fat, dusty boots. "I thought I saw——"

"*Most* improbable," her aunt said finally. "Now, this is what I was saying when you interrupted me. It's plain to be seen that your uncle has thoughtlessly set us down in the very midst of one of these strange Western sects that we've read so much about. Nobody, Amy—nobody knows who or what these strange women may be. They may be Mormons. They may be Raja Yogas. They may even be those queer Yama Yama people that Biddle knows about. But at *any* rate, we must be on our guard—and we must hold ourselves aloof!"

"But won't that be rather difficult?" her niece objected timidly, as she thought of the secretary's handclasp and her pleasant eyes. "Shall I also hold myself aloof from Mr. Holly?"

"By no means, dear," her aunt replied. "Indeed, I think you might very profitably draw him

out a little as to his past life. He is evidently a bizarre, though simple-minded character. Please don't misunderstand me, Amy. It is only that at *my* time of life I do not feel equal to bandying religious argument with the cook, or being taught Theosophy by a Missing Link."

While it is not improbable that Amy long remembered her relative's remarks, issued in the midst of her alarms, yet an amused gleam shone in her eyes as she proceeded towards her own room. A certain secretiveness in humor seemed to be Amy's major fault.

"You won't catch me aloofing myself from anyone out here in the West," said Amy to herself. "I've been hidden away in a little red-brick house long enough as it is. I'd give a whole lot to have that snake girl's tan on my face."

On the threshold she hesitated uncertainly, but only for a moment. The three strange women were waiting for her, side by side on her bed. As she entered the Secretary-Lady came gracefully forward and helped her with her veil; the Snake-Lady tendered cologne; the Cook-Lady unstrapped her baggage. A sweet, swift smile from Amy and their tongues were unleashed. With a sympathetic, thoroughly feminine rush, they surrounded

her. For the first time in years poor Amy Radnor found herself the dazed center of attraction, with women's soft arms around her and women's voices babbling lovable nonsense in her ears.

"And NOW!" said Imogene, with a pent-up squeal of joy. "Now let's see what this Amy-girl's got in her trunk!"

As may be inferred, it was not without certain misgivings that Mrs. Warder entered the dining-room at the call of the triangle. Finding, however, that everyone already knew everyone else, she accepted the introductions with lessened timidity. Now that there was opportunity to observe, it seemed futile to employ a Fabian policy against Cobrita's doll-like face and figure. In any event, she saw that her husband's concurrence could hardly be relied on, for he had come on to a jovial footing with everyone, and was rapidly nearing the back-slapping stage. At her elbow, Amy Radnor, unmindful of instructions, skirmished boldly with the gaunt Mr. Peters. Turning to Biddle as a forlorn hope, she found him frankly interested in the secretary. Mrs. Warder adjusted her glasses and considered the young person.

Miss Belvawney, at the head of the table, was pouring tea. Even under the appalling scrutiny

Miss Belvawney was quite self-possessed, for the tinge of color in her creamy cheek sprang less from excitement than from perfect happiness. Fresh and dainty in a starched white waist, she was sitting behind her teacups as supple-wristed and gracious as if she had done naught else in all her fair young life but assist at functions. It was a far cry from hanging precariously in mid-air by one's toes to dropping sugar into a millionaire's teacup and asking sweetly, "Two lumps, or three? And *do* you take cream?" At least, so thought the Belvawney person, and so thrilled with the delightfulness of her position that her eyes took on their occasional star-like appearance, thus innocently misleading the interested Biddle.

"Alas! It is as I feared," thought his mother. "She is a beautiful woman."

At that moment the seat opposite Mrs. Warder, which until now had remained vacant, was suddenly filled. "Listen to me, people," said the new arrival. "No more beef-à-la-mode till cool weather in October. It gets me all het up."

Turning to Mrs. Warder, the strange individual made a preliminary offering. "I hope you had a nice ride," she said.

"Rahther dusty, I'm afraid," replied Mrs.

Warder in a discouraging tone, looking over the tops of her glasses. "Is this the cook?"

"Not—not the regular one," stammered Imogene.

"No," smiled Mrs. Warder. "Not a regular cook."

"Oh, but I am," insisted Imogene, reddening. "I'm only sort of helping out——"

"I understand. Merely an assistant. But you do very well. I feel sure you will learn in time. The canned things make it so much easier. What is your name, Cook? I feel as if I ought to know everyone's name, here."

"Imogene," responded the Strong Woman, pallid with wrath.

"What a lovely name—what a beautiful name, in fact. Surely your last name is as well chosen."

"It's—it's BOGGS!" exploded Imogene, and rising from her chair with a quivering lip, she rushed back to the kitchen.

"Rather precipitate," Mrs. Warder murmured vaguely to Amy, who, besides Drybone, was the only one who had overheard.

"Rather rude," answered Amy, with similar vagueness, and smiled blandly on the silent Mr. Peters.

144 THE DESERT AND MRS. AJAX

The sound of oven doors slammed shut came from the kitchen, and the strange woman appeared in the doorway. Although she held her arms valiantly akimbo, two hot tears hopped out of her eyes and rolled down her plump cheeks.

"Dessert's coming up," she announced tremulously. "M-m-make your bets with the Wild Man. Slat Pie or Spotted Pup!"

It cannot be said that all of the company were fully at their ease for the next few minutes. Vaguely, but none the less uncomfortably, Mr. Warder, for one, felt a sudden drop in the social temperature, and he promptly shot a quick look at his wife's gray face.

"Charlotte's been messing things up again," he guessed shrewdly. "But these people won't take things in our whipped-dog Eastern way. She'd better look out for herself."

"What's up?" he asked with involuntary amusement, as he discerned a movement of the company from the dinner-table to the corral.

Cobrita turned her saucer-like eyes of blue.

"Wild Man's going to practice Pretty Percy," she said informingly, and hastened after Dry-bone, who, in some subtle way, seemed to be maneuvering Mrs. Warder into the expedition.

Warder followed, nibbling on a cigar and wondering what the foreman had in hand. Presently he stopped and listened.

"*He ain't much*," he heard Drybone remarking scornfully to Mrs. Warder as they stood inspecting the elephant through the bars of the corral. "Now that I kin read his mind, I kin see he only knows two English words, 'Hay' and 'Sleep.' And yet he figures he's the only one in his class. But there was a sure-enough ellefunt out yere a while back—the Gentry-Macdonald ellefunt. Y'u've heard of it?" he asked pensively of the lady, and feigned indifference against the fence.

"I am not conscious of ever having been informed——"

"It was a queer animile," Drybone mused reminiscently. "It had *no* father—and *no* mother."

"Pardon me," interposed Mrs. Warder, a little too directly. "Let me fully understand you. Do you say it had *no mother?*"

"No," he said sadly, and shook his head. "No mother."

"No mother *at all?*" pursued the lady recklessly, at which her husband uttered a faint choking sound.

146 THE DESERT AND MRS. AJAX

"No," answered Drybone kindly. "Not even the *teeniest* bit. Y'u see, *it was a wild one!* And it only lived part of one day.

"It was first found down on the Vegas Desert by a felluh named Bill Gentry. He found it the same day that Old Man Pickett's mules ran away while he was out prospecting at the foot of Charleston Peak. The old man had been wearing moccasins the day before and it had rained, so he hung 'em up at night tu dry. In the middle of the night a coyote up on the range caught scent of 'em and came down and ate 'em up,—hide and hair. When sun-up came the old man found he had no footgear.

"'Prospecting merely in German socks might not be lucky,' the old man says. 'I fear and believe I must go tu Las Vegas for a set of shoes,' and he goes tu ketch up his mules.

"But these yere mules had decided during the night that they didn't approve of the country, so while he was hitching up they hee-hawed and ran away out on the desert.

"'My—dear—*me!*' says the old man, after he's got the Recording Angel all tired out. 'No stock—and no footgear! Whatever shall I do? I can't get one without the other and I haven't

got either. Whatever—whatever—oh—hum—hum——’

“Just then his eye falls on the canvas nose-bags those ornery mules had used tu eat out of. Right away he sticks a foot into one of ’em. It was sloshy but soothing. He puts on the other, hists up the neck-ropes and ties ’em round his waist, tries ’em out on a barrel cactus and a rock, and goes clumping off through the brush after his mules.

“Now, it happened that Bill Gentry and Scotty Macdonald were chloriding a little claim up on the ‘bench’ about this time, and Bill happened tu be out on the flat with his gun. After a while he comes tu a piece of soft borax flat and some very amazing tracks.

“He followed quite a ways. They made him goggle-eyed.

“‘My, my, Bill!’ he says tu hisself. ‘*What* do y’u reckon it is? It’s plenty big enough for a piano, but a man wouldn’t figure much on *that*, and yet it ain’t a felluh walking on his head. I reckon I *could* make marks like those with the butt-end of a churn—but, why should I?’

“With that he takes a chew and a long think and says:

“ ‘That measly thing’s *front* is just exactly like its *tail*. It don’t look tu me like a square deal. How would a felluh know where tu shoot?’ And with that he turns around and runs all the way back tu camp. He begins yelling when he was a pretty long ways off.

“ ‘Hello-o-o, *Scotty!*’ he yells. ‘Y’u come right out yere with a gun and all the cartridges y’u got. THERE’S A TERRIBUL WILD ELLEFUNT DOWN YERE ON THE FLAT!’

“ ‘Y’u go tu the devil,’ says Scotty, sticking his old bald head out of the cabin door. ‘I’m carpentering my beard. I just *hate* ellefunts on shaving days.’

“ ‘I’m telling y’u,’ yells Bill.

“ ‘I’m telling y’u,’ hollers Scotty. ‘There hasn’t been an ellefunt north of the Ryer Grande for years and years?’

“ ‘It’s got tracks as big as your hat,’ yells Bill. ‘I followed ’em for worse than a mile.’

“ ‘How many toes did it have?’ says Scotty.

“ ‘Hasn’t got any toes,’ yells Bill, running around in circles and waving his arms. ‘*It’s a young one!*’

“ ‘When Scotty heard that he got all het up.

He grabbed his gun in one hand and the shaving-brush in the other and away he went. They trailed quite a ways. When they stops tu rest Scotty looks around pretty cautious, and says:

“ ‘Bill, the last time y’u saw an ellefunt what would y’u allow he mostly looked like? Of course, I *know*, Bill—if it comes right down tu *that*—but I never was bigotry about these things.’ ”

“ ‘Scotty,’ says Bill, ‘it’s hardly fair for me tu say. Y’u know, Scotty, what this yere American language of ours kin say. Y’u know what words kin do, and what they just natch’ly *can’t* do,—what there ain’t any sense in their *trying* tu do,—and I’m telling y’u, Scotty, there ain’t any words kin describe an animile like that!’ ”

“ ‘Gosh!’ says Scotty, letting it slip right out.

“ ‘Yessir,’ says Bill. ‘If I knowed any kind of a noise that would make y’u think right away of an ellefunt I’d make it, Scotty—bet on that.’ ”

“ ‘About what would y’u call the formation?’ asks Scotty.

“ ‘Well,’ says Bill, ‘somedays it reminds folks of a coyote that’s growed up tu resemble a terrible fierce hawg.’ ”

“ ‘A-öh!’ says Scotty. ‘About how big?’ ”

“ ‘Y’u see, that was a natural question for this

yere Scotty man. He had a fearful disposition.

“ ‘Well,’ says Bill, looking around for those little old tracks again so’s he could quit instructin’ Scotty, ‘there’s little ones, of course,—and big ones,—and some that’s sort of poor—and runty—and *religious*. There’s others, too, that just keeps on a-growing. It’s never been rightly knowed if they ever *do* stop.’

“ ‘Scotty didn’t say much. The end of the shaving-brush was spinning around in his mouth, and his eyes stuck out like ears on a potato. *He was making ellefunts tu hissself in his mind.*

“ ‘Be a good fellow, Bill,’ says he. ‘Gimme a line on the front section.’

“ ‘Scotty,’ says Bill, mighty pleasant, ‘take it from me. This is a high-grade animile. Automologically speaking, the front legs is set up ve-e-ry, very close tu the shoulders. In between these two big, strong shoulders I’m telling about, comes the head and eyes—and teeth—when, of course, they ain’t stretched ’way up looking ’round through the trees.’

“ ‘THE TEETH!’ hollers Scotty.

“ ‘Yessir,’ says Bill. ‘And the body comes right along behind. The hind legs, they have tu

THE DESERT AND MRS. 'AJAX' 151

hit up a good gait and keep up the very best they can.'

" 'S-s-s-say,' says Scotty, and he goes tu pulling at Bill's sleeve. 'Say, Bill, kin they *run?*' "

" 'Can they *run?*' says Bill. 'Can they—Say! Don't y'u ever ask me such a foolish question again.'

" But Scotty didn't care. He was making new ellefunts tu hissself in his mind—and more of 'em—and wusser ones.

" 'I do wish,' complains Bill, 'that y'u wouldn't make so much noise while we're trailing these wild ellefunts. There you've gone and scared up a jack-rabbit. Now, *he'll* go, like as not, and tell the ellefunt we're a-coming. *Then*, where do you suppose we'd be?'

" 'Well, I dunno,' says Scotty. 'I've been considerin' that. I dunno just where we *would* be, Bill.'

" Pretty soon Scotty sits down on a rock. He was pretty mournful and sad. Says he:

" 'Were y'u ever about tu figure that mebbe we could *trap* him, some way?'

" With that Bill steps off a little, and looks at him sideways, and gives a laugh.

" It was a mean laugh. Scotty told me about

it. It was one of those laughs that make y'u feel as if y'u hadn't ever been any good at all in the world—not tu nobody—not even a dawg. It would make y'u realize right then and there that y'u couldn't stop drinking even if y'u wanted tu. It would come over y'u that all along y'u had been just a big, fat thing, with a silly smile, and shiny, red ears.

“While Scotty was sitting there, thinking how horrible and true it all was, Bill says:

“‘Scotty! I tell y'u wot! We haven't saw any new tracks lately and I've about made up my mind that he's hiding out somewheres. What we've got tu do now is tu distract him. I guess you'd better come out yere, Scotty, and lie down on your back.’

“Scotty inspects the lay of the ground and the sun. They was not good tu Scotty.

“‘What for?’ says Scotty.

“‘Now, never y'u mind,’ coaxes Bill. ‘This will be all right, reely, trooly it will. Y'u see, Scotty—I'll take off my neck-rope, and tie it 'round your feet. Then y'u lie still on your back, with your feet curled up in the air——’

“‘Like a sick lizard,’ says Scotty.

“‘—And wave 'em back and forth—and side-

ways,' says Bill. 'Now, all the time I'll be hiding behind some big rock with my gun, and when he comes a-galloping out, mad as a hornet, looking around tu see what the trouble is—I'll get him,' he says.

" 'Hmmmm,' says Scotty. 'S'posing y'u *don't* get him? '

" 'But they allers do it this way in Africker,' says Bill. 'Do y'u reckon y'u know more than an Africker, Scotty? '

" 'I believe I'd just as soon *not*,' says Scotty.

"After that Bill got mad. 'Here I am,' said he, 'a-scheming and a-planning and a-working my poor brain trying *some* way tu capture this dangerous ellefunt, and make your everlasting fortune. And there y'u sit, a-measling 'round on a rock and raising these little pee-wee objections.'

" 'My liver is bad,' says Scotty. 'It hasn't hurt me so in I don't know when. I don't feel as if I was doing right by my family in persooiin' these wild ellefunts, anyway. I bet *your* wife wouldn't take much stock in it. It's too harrowing. Now, y'u know I allers stand by y'u, Bill. Who was it got Smoky Overton's wife's husband dead drunk down tu Caliente last Christmas so's y'u could get out of town? Who was it took

154 THE DESERT AND MRS. AJAX

all your money away from y'u that night down tu Tucson, so's y'u couldn't play it away on the wheel? Who was it sold y'u a half interest in this yere valible mine we've got? Y'u answer me them three things, Bill Gentry. *Then* I'll tell y'u how I'd feel if I was lying out there on the sand all mashed out flatter than a hot cake.'

"Now, what this Scotty man was saying was mostly true, and Bill began tu feel bad about asking so much of Scotty's liver. He was feeling sorry about those days in Arizona, too, when all of a sudden he remembered that the money Scotty had blasted out of his jeans down at Tucson he *hadn't ever given back!* Right away he began tu feel worse. As a matter of fact, he was crawling up behind Scotty on his hands and knees tu interview him p'intedly on the subject when Scotty jumped up and let out a yell. '*Are those the tracks?*' he hollers.

"Sure enough, there they were; behind a grease-wood, and around a mesquite, and out on the flat; as big as soup-bowls and as deep as a stove-pipe. On the edge of a sand gully they stopped. The ellefunt had got his feet crossed and rolled down. Then he had thrashed around. It was a sweet sight. Just then, around the base of the hill

through the brush, comes a noise like a flock of stampeded yearlings. The rocks went tu falling and the dirt went tu sliding. Something comes scrambling along with an unnatural number of heads and ears. It was breathing like a rusty pump in the night.

“ ‘ By the Great Divide,’ yells Scotty. ‘ It’s got eight legs!’ and he shakes his gun, and runs all the way back tu camp.

“ Bill saw he’d be awful hard tu catch—*but he did it*. He didn’t linger any as he went by, either. Only yelled over his shoulder:

“ ‘ *Don’t stay long, Scotty!* ’ ”

At this point in his narrative Mr. Peters suddenly paused. With a hasty clutch behind him, he descended agilely from the fence-rail on which he had been mounted. Safe on the ground again he glared suspiciously at the elephant, who, long since discarded by the Wild Man, was to all appearances rocking itself to sleep.

“ And that’s what I said in the beginning,” said Drybone. “ *He ain’t much. He’s a real one. I only wish I could have seen Scotty’s.* ”

CHAPTER VIII

"If there's one thing I like better than another about this Western country it's the way you fellows look at life," Warder said to Holly next morning over their after-breakfast cigars. "While, in a sense, you may be fatalists, yet it strikes me yours is the proper kind of fatalism. If your luck doesn't come right now, nothing can prevent its coming *next* time. It might be termed 'bulldozing the future,' eh?"

"If you'll always keep going two feet farther you'll surely find the pay-shoot," the ranchman answered with a smile.

"That's the spirit," Warder exclaimed, sitting up in his chair. "That's what I like. And you're fighting with old Dame Nature all the time—not with human nature. I guess I can feel a little chesty when I arrange a car shortage for the other fellow, but to *my* mind this gold-mining business is something essentially—er—er, why, damn it all—it's *nobler!* I tell you frankly, I'm glad to be in it, although I'll confess I don't know beans about it—yet."

"Yes," he continued, "I was tickled to death to get away from it all back East and play with something new. The old game is pretty sordid after you know the ropes. And it was getting to be too much the style in my crowd to put over something 'big.' Of course, if a dollar smiles at me I take it, but when the widows and orphans began writing to the ten-cent magazines I welched. Said I, 'Gentlemen, there's a theory abroad in these regenerate days that a man with more than a million is little better than a crazy collector of old coins, and while I don't entirely subscribe I'm going to make Cæsar's wife look like a Broadway flirt.' You see, I wanted to get into something new and clean. Buying another man's clerks or leaving a bunch of bills on a certain table in a certain room was something like our coal shipments used to be—there were 'drawbacks.' And so I thought I'd try this mining game. Now that I'm in it I like it. I can see it's going to be just a good, long rest—no mental excitement, no rows, no shenanigan—just pure, unadulterated *rest*. You simply find the gold, or you *don't*. You sell your article at any time of year, at a fixed price, in a market that's never glutted and has no competition. No trouble, no lawsuits, nothing

158 THE DESERT AND MRS. AJAX

underhanded *there*, you bet. If that isn't a satisfactory snare for the sunny simoleon I want to know it. But now that we're on the subject, suppose you tell how things stand to date at the mines."

With a few words and an illuminating gesture or two the story of the Yellow Dog was put clearly before him.

"So that's where all this talk of a shutdown comes from," Warder said shrewdly. "I see now why you're still staying here at the ranch. I suspected all along that you'd started the reports I heard in Salt Lake, but I wanted to let you get at it your own way. But let me get this Atlas situation clear in my mind. What is it this gentleman claims?" and he listened carefully while Holly, with a few mental reservations, indicated the possible course of events. At the word "injunction" Warder's gradually accumulating wrath came to a head.

"So he *will* sue and he *won't* sell out," he snapped angrily. "Well, if that's the state of the case we'll get in motion. I must confess I didn't exactly look for such things in *this* business," he said with comic dismay, "but if that fellow or any pinheaded bunch of ginks he sells out to think they

can put anything over on *us*, we'll unmuzzle a bag of tricks that'll make 'em see colored lights." Warder stopped and grinned sheepishly at Holly, then burst into uproarious laughter. "I guess that *clean business* I was gassing about is always in the next county."

The ranchman took a blue print from his pocket and pointed with his cigar.

"The day after we 'abandoned' the tunnel on the seven hundred we opened her up again—elsewhere," he said. "We ran a cross-cut into the foot-wall here at the end of the drift and sunk a winze till we got below the fractured zone. Then we drifted back——"

"Was it *there*?"

"It *was*—and better than ever. But we didn't stop with that. We did a little trespassing. We went on into Atlas ground and proved conclusively that Atlas is a separate vein——"

"*Bully for you!*" shouted Warder.

"And while we were proving it we did some measuring and sampling. That young engineer you sent out here has the figures for it in his note-book. Of course, he's young and inclined to exaggerate, but——"

"The Atlas has got to belong to *us*," the East-

erner finished instantly. "*Now* you're talking business. *Now* I begin to see where *I* come in. Just let me get at that fellow after we've shed a few salt tears over the horrible state of the mine and let's see what *I* can do. SAY! but we'll make a great pair! I wish I'd come out here sooner," chortled the seeker after clean business. "I hate to give you all the credit for this. What do you really think the Atlas is worth to us?"

"Well," said Holly with a grim chuckle, "if you and I get hold of the Atlas we'll both need guardians. It won't be safe to have so much money."

"HANG THE MONEY!" roared Warder. "What *I* want is a FIGHT!"

Biddle Warder, in riding clothes, now joined them, and it was soon arranged that the three should leave for the mines the next morning at daybreak.

Biddle was feeling very fit this morning. Either the altitude, or despised sleep, had repaired the joyous ravages of the Yama Yamas and he felt ready to be amused. In the past this had never been difficult, for, to verge on the descriptive, Biddle was a very well-favored boy. His blue eye was a very blue blue and his blond hair, close

cropped on the sides, owned a shining ripple on top. His nose and his legs were straight, two excellent things in man, and while he was presumably cleanly tubbed he had, in any event, the florid faculty of always seeming so which, no doubt, is the greater advantage. Whenever he laughed, which he did in a naïvely ingratiating way, he added a mouthful of strong, white teeth to his other good points. It being that Biddle could warble a little song—completely mystify you with a pack of cards or faithfully reproduce a lion in pursuit of a gazelle if provided with a piano—it will be seen that he was not far removed from that pleasantly disrespectful young man who makes attractive the front row of our college glee club, tells us how to run our business over our cigar, and eventually marries our daughter.

Biddle was decidedly interested in Clarice. She was much too handsome a young woman to be without a history, he thought, although "past" was the word in mind, and he warmed to the prospect of a flirtation. But Miss Belvawney was exceedingly preoccupied this morning and Biddle felt disappointed, after the telegram to Wiley had been sent, that she did not respond. He felt, furthermore, as if an impression of himself were crys-

162 THE DESERT AND MRS. AJAX

tallizing in the girl's mind. Biddle thought her excessively cautious.

"It's too bad you're not going to the mine with us," said he. "I'd like to take you down a mine."

"What is it like?" asked Clarice.

"Oh, you just go down and stumble around and bump your head on the gold. It's nice and dark down there," he murmured.

"Hmmm," said Clarice, as she took up her work. "I don't like the dark."

"You'd have to wear men's clothes," he continued. "You'd look very well in them, I think."

The girl began to frown. How much did this young man know about her?

Biddle saw he was making a poor start, and the appearance of the genial Drybone, wandering aimlessly about in the front yard, was made the occasion of a quick shift.

"What a funny old sketch," he said. "You must get a lot of fun out of him."

"We're all 'sketches,'" the girl answered evenly, her lips in a thoughtful pout. Then her brows relaxed as she saw the foreman mount the steps and doff his hat to Mrs. Warder on the porch. She suspected, from Mr. Peters' strangely

roving eye, that he was about to perpetrate something.

"I'm right glad you're interested in poetry, ma'am," the foreman said with a faint cough, as he took a chair beside Mrs. Warder and laid his hat on the floor between them. "Good poetry critics are fairly scarce in these parts—it discourages a man all up. There *was* an editor over in Esmeralda County once that used to criticise my poetry for me, but when I went over there to see him about a criticism he'd written on something of mine, he was dead—died the day before," said Drybone.

"Mastoiditis," said Mrs. Warder. "Everyone has it nowadays."

"Oh, no," said Drybone. "Private killing. Y'u see, *another poet got there a day ahead of me.*

"But, now,—about this little thing that I dashed off last night,—of course, the *words* ain't much, the *idee* is what I'm mainly sot on."

"Yes," the lady agreed thoughtfully. "Ideas are everything. Without them even the very longest poem would—eh—would—eh——"

"That's me!" said Drybone happily, coming to her rescue. "And so I took a *big* one!"

"Love, of course?" smiled the Philadelphian.

"No," replied the foreman decisively, while his eye rolled wildly. "REVENGE!"

He took a sheet of paper from his pocket and cleared his throat. "This first part is just ordinary description—y'u don't get the 'Revenge' till it nearly stops. This yere is the first line:

"'O-h-h-h-h-h! Horrid Rat!'"

"Mercy!" exclaimed the lady, with a faint scream. "A horrid *what?*"

"RAT!" replied the foreman with surprise. "What's the matter, ma'am? Ain't rats used much in poems back East? This rat was a mean one, so I just had to. It's all in the idee—you'll see.

"'O-h-h-h-h-h-h! Horrid Rat!'

Oh, dark and dredful beest!

Beset with hare, and sin, and midnight greed!

How very curiyus thy eye,

How unfathomobul thy way!

Down in the cellurs mold,

Thou hast thy den.

The brite day's sun

Holds out no shining loor.

THE DESERT AND MRS. AJAX 165

I wouldn't be a rat—fer *any thing!*
(Fer kids tu throw a stone
And wimen holler)
And yet, pore thing,
With all thy faults thou only stole
Tu fill thy stummick!
And many a man has did a wusser thing!
But, *say!* it cleen beets me,
How yu kin naw
Through boards and not get belly-akes!
Oh, critter of perfidyus nite!
Oh, denizen of darker worlds than this!
If I wuz y'u I'd feel so ding dang bad
I'd just lay down and *die!*

But y'u wuz ketched, all rite,
With all your arts feline,
To make example to your kind.
There aint no rat kin steel my socks
And not get ketched—*sometime!*”

Drybone paused and looked hopefully over his spectacles.

“How do you feel about it?” he asked anxiously.

“I feel—rather upset,” the Philadelphian said

looking as if she were about two days out on a stormy passage. "It must be something I've eaten. I think I'll go inside."

"I could make them all 'cats,' if y'u like," Drybone called after her, as she disappeared, and Biddle, with a reddened face, went to meet her. "It's just the idee, y'u know."

With Biddle disposed of, Clarice sped away in search of the ranchman. Her acquaintance with Buckner in Moab had been advanced to the stage where the storekeeper was growing loquacious and the girl was on edge for a clue. What she did not understand, however, was Holly's increasing reticence. She knew that he was constantly receiving reports of some nature as to Macklin, for there were letters which he forgot to give her to file and there were low-voiced men who came and talked with him down by the corral, ate a silent meal, and rode away again. Something was on foot and she wondered why his previous frankness had been withdrawn. Searching about the outskirts of the ranch, she found him, rather to her astonishment, boyishly fishing leaves out of an irrigating ditch with a stick. He colored a little when discovered, for the stick was obviously inadequate.

To tell the truth, Dick Holly was sadly perplexed. His scouts brought him nothing tangible as to the cause of Drew's death, while Macklin's history, as so far reported, showed only that he had once had a wife, like many another man, and had spent much of his time outside of mining camps. The full weight of what this might mean to the girl was troubling him, and the more he thought of it the more determined he was to keep it from her.

"I've wanted to talk to you about Buckner," the girl began, with a note in her voice that chided him for not trusting her completely.

"Well," said Holly, with a grave look, "I guess that matter will be settled up soon. We're going over there to-morrow."

"You mean that you have proof that Macklin really *is* the murderer?" asked she whom Fate was fast making Macklin's daughter.

"'Proof' is a mighty big word," the man answered, and smiled up at her as best he could. "Sit down here and fish with me for a while, and we'll see how much we know."

"We have to go back three years," he said, choosing his words carefully. "We find that Drew left Moab with his outfit to go north through

168 THE DESERT AND MRS. AJAX

Pahranegat Valley into Idaho. He had his assessment work done on the Atlas and was free for a year. We hadn't started up the Yellow Dog at that time and so, of course, there wasn't any boom. So this man Drew pulls his freight, and he goes by the way of the Devil's Playground to get into the Pahranegat and save time. Somewhere along there he meets Macklin. Now, we'll say that this Macklin man knows that Atlas is good ground and makes him an offer for the mine. Suppose, again, that Drew is short of money. Suppose that he's growing discouraged—with no buyers in sight—and only a little pay-ore—and no boom coming his way. Well, then—he sells out to Macklin—for two hundred dollars. So far, so good. And now we have to figure another element into the game that people don't always count on, and that is—whisky. Men drink, you know, and men get drunk, and sometimes they're not always exactly happy about it. Perhaps this Drew man was like that. Perhaps, too, he kept gettin' worse and worse and finally was foolish with a gun. Now, it's a funny thing that the only thing you can't bluff with out here is a gun. You either use it or you *don't*. Perhaps Macklin was the quicker of the two.

"And now let's see where we are. Here is Drew, lying there in the sand by the campfire by his own fault, and here is Macklin standing and looking down at him and thanking his stars that he was good and quick. Over there are four or five *burros*. And all around is just sand and sky and lonesomeness—and God not very close by, either. And that's *all*, you understand—*all*. No witnesses—no policeman to blow on his little whistle—no crowd to collect—nothing of that kind. Just one man there all alone, with the fellow that tried to kill him huddled up like a suit of old clothes on the ground.

"And now we begin to see what proof is. What is Macklin going to do? Can he go back to Moab and say, 'This fellow tried to shoot me'? If he does, the Sheriff will take him in a disgusted sort of way for being such a fool, and lock him up, and after a while they try him. The county goes to expense and Macklin goes to expense and all for what? Just to have twelve men listen to a *perfect* story of how one man got full and tried to kill another. Now, some of those men are friends of Drew's and they win over the rest, and Macklin gets hung—not because he was guilty but because he was *unlucky*. But perhaps they disagree. Al-

170 THE DESERT AND MRS. AJAX

low that and then see what happens. Macklin, who has as good a claim and as good a right as any in these parts, gets run out of the country. Every one knows about him. Everyone points their finger at him. He gets sick of it after a while and disappears.

“Now, look at the other thing he can do. He can hide the body and sell the *burros* and outfit. He can go away for a month or so, come back, record his purchase of the claim, and go to work, and try to forget it. Time passes and they find the body and remember about the other man. And just as they're beginning to raise a hue and cry they begin to think along the lines I've laid out. And they get weaker and weaker and tired of hearing the professional bloodhounds bark, and after a while they let it drop.”

He stopped and opened out his hands to her with the kindly smile she loved. “Do you see, Miss Clarice? Perhaps it wasn't murder, after all. Perhaps it was only hard luck. Can you hang a man for that?”

He watched her puzzling over his ingenious solution and then softly drew a long breath. “Oh, well,” he said, “I guess we won't worry about it

any more. We'll get the Atlas to-morrow, never fear.

"It will be a nice thing when we do," he continued in lighter tones. "Warder says he's going to keep his son out here to watch the job. Of course, that will be regarded as very pleasant by all—he seems to be an active young fellow. It's funny how such a rich young man hasn't any wife. He ought to make a competent husband, I should judge."

"Suppose," said Clarice, disregarding the brazen allusion to young Warder, "suppose that Macklin gave the other man two hundred dollars for the claim?"

"Yes," said the ranchman weakly.

"Then why wasn't it on the body?"

The ranchman smiled. "You mean—he would leave it there to make good his statement about the purchase? Well, the body was found by One-eyed Brewster of Bullionfield," he said with fortunate recollection. "One-Eye's been needing that two hundred for right some time."

"But, do they *know* that Macklin had two hundred dollars, to begin with?"

Holly shook his head. There was nothing he could say. In spite of his attempts to explain the

172 THE DESERT AND MRS. AJAX

case away she had put her finger unerringly on its weakest spot.

If he feared, however, that she was about to continue the subject he was mistaken, for the girl had won her point and she knew it. Either she had given him an idea to work on or else his defense of the Atlas man had been only a pretense, as she much suspected. In any case, she felt she had a right to go on with what she was doing, and so began to glow inwardly again. She rose blithely to her feet, without touching her hands to the ground, as he noticed admiringly, and smiled down at him with the stars in her eyes once more. She did not know it, but in her radiant health and beauty she was the most desirable, all-satisfying thing that the ranchman's world had ever held.

"I'm so glad that you like young Mr. Warder," she said with what he agonizingly recognized as a pleased note in her voice. "If he's to stay out here I think he ought to marry a Western girl."

CHAPTER IX

"AMY," remarked her aunt as the two sat together on the fresh shadowed veranda, "did you see your uncle this morning before he started for the mines?"

"No, Aunt," said Amy carefully. "I didn't see Mr. Holly—I mean, Uncle Os'. I didn't get up till half-after seven. But I think Miss Belvawney saw them."

"I was wondering what had brought you to such early hours," Mrs. Warder mused in a tone that both explained her question and asked another. "It must be because the sun rises so much earlier out here."

"I was writing a letter," responded Amy, with true Western recklessness.

"Give me the letter and I will put a stamp on it for you," her aunt said a little too promptly. "I was careful to bring some good stamps with me from Philadelphia."

"Thank you very much, Aunt," the discerning niece replied; "but I have already given the letter to Miss Belvawney to mail with the others."

It had taken Clarice a little time to understand Miss Radnor. As when at night the most harmless shapes fill our breast with wild alarms, so Amy's swift smiles at the ranchman had furnished cause for not a little distress, but while Clarice had been deliciously torturing herself the thin girl had come to her with encircling arms, a blush, and a letter, whereupon there had been a remarkable outburst of affection and engagements of secrecy.

But however easily the others adapted themselves, Mrs. Warder daily found life only the more disconcerting.

"That remarkable woman!" she said to her niece, so abruptly that Amy divined the cause of the long meditation. "I can't understand her at all. When I was first with her this morning she seemed quite rational, but later on she became so nervous and acted so strangely that I came away. Almost immediately afterwards I saw her out in the back yard throwing an anvil—an *anvil*, Amy—up in the air and catching it when it came down. Then she gave a loud, wild laugh and rushed back into the house——"

"What were you talking about?" asked Amy curiously.

"We *began* by talking about how long you

ought to let jelly boil *after* you put the sugar in," her aunt replied, "but it was almost no time at all before I found that the woman has *no* distinct conception of the future life. I shouldn't like to say that her influence here is precisely sinister, yet religious exercises of some kind, say, a half-hour of talk and prayer each afternoon at four o'clock——"

"Imogene blasts at four," reflected Amy. "I'm not sure that even prayer would dislodge her from her mine at that hour. Have you thought, Aunt Charlotte, of some easy approach that we might make? Something rather gradual, you know——"

"You are searching for a word, Amy. I have it. We must be '*adroit*.'"

"Y-e-e-e-s," conceded Amy. "But I've been thinking that some stepping-stone, like fancy-work——"

"The very thing. How you stimulate my mind, my dear. My workbag is up on my bureau—if you don't mind."

When Amy returned to the veranda it was to find Miss Belvawney and the other Pilkington women already there, probably gathered together by some telepathic force.

"We really must form a Sewing Society," Mrs.

176 THE DESERT AND MRS. AJAX

Warder was saying jovially. "Now, in Philadelphia we often sew this way for poor people."

"So do we," murmured Imogene.

"We might even give ourselves a name." Mrs. Warder's wary eye, flitting from face to face, encountered only blank innocence. "Let us vote on a name. I have already been thinking of one. Might I suggest 'Daughters of Dorcas'?"

"All agreeable, say AYE!" announced Imogene.

"AYE!" said Cobrita and Clarice.

"Dorcas is elected, all right," said the Strong Woman swiftly. "I only hope she was a married woman. Was she?"

"Well, really! Hum—er—well——"

"Who *was* Dorcas?" asked the little yellow-haired person who knew all about snakes.

"Dorcas," said Mrs. Warder, not too rapidly, "Dorcas was a woman in the Bible who *sewed*. But more than that——"

"I'm real sorry, Mrs. Warder," Imogene interposed forcefully, "but I'm mighty partickler about such things. I always got to *know*."

"Her other name was 'Tabitha,'" ventured Clarice.

"But I want to know—What's that, girly? *Two* first names?"

"She was *called* 'Tabitha,' which *meant* 'Dorcas,'" Amy explained, hoping to clarify the situation.

"And Saint Peter brought her back to life after she was dead," added Clarice. "And that is all that is known about her."

"And that is all that is known about her," said Mrs. Warder.

"Well—I dunno," Imogene muttered, with comic helplessness. "Times have changed. Mighty few poor seamstresses *I* ever knew ever wanted to be brought back. But it ain't clear in my mind yet——" Imogene's voice suddenly faded away before a presage of coming events which her alert eyes had discerned in the foreground.

Down by the corral a person, who had lately dismounted from a thin-necked, ribby little horse, was immersed in conversation with Mr. Peters. To those who could interpret Drybone's insidious persuasions it was clear that he was recommending some line of action to the stranger, and although the horseman at first seemed only partly

willing, the foreman presently linked an arm in his and led him up to the house.

"Bishop Moroni Sorensen—from Bull Valley Stake," Mr. Peters announced, while his eyes flitted from face to face with suspicious evasiveness. "Brother Moroni is on his annual round-up for mavericks out of the churchly fold, ladies, and I knew you'd want to see him. I hope you've got your branding-irons hot, Bishop."

"Pleezed tu meet y'u, folks," the Bishop responded, with professional ease, smiling yellowly and shaking hands all around. "Always pleezed tu meet the ladies."

On closer inspection, the Bishop proved to be a gaunt, bleak individual, very loosely jointed and sallow. With his thick, black hair combed back from his forehead and his high cheek-bones and bold gray eyes, he seemed not unlike a hard-faced daguerreotype of Civil War times. The pristine blackness of his old-fashioned cutaway coat had been weathered to a depressing green, and blue-jeans trousers, with no visible means of support, only partly hid a pair of misshapen boots. As his eyes, a little closely set together, flickered over the group, they rested longer than was necessary upon Clarice. They gave her the uncomfortable feel-



" BISHOP SORENSEN FROM BULL VALLEY STAKE "

ing that the Bishop was, in truth, always pleased to meet the ladies.

"Is he a *Mormon*?" Mrs. Warder whispered timidly to her nearest neighbor, who she immediately realized was Imogene.

"*You bet!* And the very biggest of the lot!" the Strong Woman whispered back, with misconveying force. "They say he's married every woman in his Stake!"

"Great heavens! What a monster!" the other breathed, and grew pale. For the first time the Easterner felt no aversion to the juggler of anvils. Imogene's thickness of fiber undoubtedly had periods of usefulness. But Mrs. Warder was not without a thrill of sacrificial pleasure in the moment of danger. Ever since the Woman's Auxiliary of the Rittenhouse Brick Church had protested to Washington against Mormon representation in Congress she had felt it to be someone's duty really to see a Mormon. And what opportunity now was hers! If Cousin Sally Cadwalader in Spruce Street could only see her Charlotte *now!* What flutterings! What envy!

"I didn't know there was so many camping here," the Bishop was drawling. "I reckon I'll have a few of The Young Men's Society ride over

from Moab. Mebbe y'u could have a dance and a leetle music. Our people are always strong on bringing the young folks together."

"But we're not exactly of the same superstition," Cobrita said, and goggled her china-blue eyes at him nervously. Not having meant to speak, she was pinkly sorry for it. "Superstition" wasn't the right word, anyway—she wished she had a snake to scare him with.

"Haw-haw-haw! Our young men don't keer about *that*," the Bishop assured her genially. "Give 'em a good leg shaking and a purty young gal like y'u, and the Sperrit kin always get its work in."

A distinct movement went through the women. The Bishop assumed too much. Not even the Eastern clothes prevented him from grouping them all under the head of "Pilkingtons"—Moab's Pilkingtons—hungry and out-at-heel and sore distressed.

"Our cause is a-gainin' in righteousness every day," the Bishop announced suddenly. "The beauties of salvation, they shall be as a fountain of living water, and a tree of life."

No one said anything.

"How beyootiful upon the mountains are the

feet of him who bringeth good tidings,' " he continued, unconsciously surveying his own boots. " 'AWAKE! and hear the words which I shall tell thee; for, behold, I am come tu declare unto y'u the glad tidings of great joy.'

"That's 'Mosiah,'" said the Bishop, with a wave of his hand. "I always begins with him. But 'Nephi' and 'Ether'—they're *my* favorytes. It seems like they ketched right hold of y'u, telling how it all happened, like they do."

"*What* happened?" queried the Strong Woman instantly.

"Well," explained the Bishop, with brightening eyes, "y'u see, Nephi tells how he got 'em all out of Jerusalem, and Ether, he tells how they all got over here. They came over in big barges—herds and flocks and families and all. It took three hundred and forty-four days tu come across. Jared's brother—he built the barges, and they was made just like a dish. Excuse me, ladies, till I get my Book outa my pants-pocket. Here it is—Page Five Hundred and Seventy-four, Chapter Two, Verse Nineteen:

" 'And they were built after a manner that they were exceeding tight, even that they would hold water like unto a dish; and the bottom thereof was

tight like unto a dish; and the sides thereof were tight like unto a dish; and the ends thereof were peaked; and the top thereof was tight like unto a dish; and the length thereof was the length of a tree; and the door thereof, when it was shut, was like unto a dish.'”

“That certainly sounds dish-like,” remarked Imogene.

“Don't it?” the Bishop acquiesced happily. “But there's more to it than that. There were holes in each dish—barge, I mean——”

“Like a colander,” said Imogene promptly.

“Not quite, ma'am. Just two holes, with stoppers. One in the roof and one in the cellar of the boat, so whichever side was up they could git air.”

“I should think they'd have certainly needed it,” murmured Mrs. Ajax, “with the boat rolling around like an egg on a plate and the flocks and herds all falling off the ceiling onto Jared's brother's head. But I'm glad to know at last how all those funny little *burros* got over here. Did they have things like that?”

“All them things, and a lot more,” was the ready response. “Ether tells about it. Chapter Nine, Verse Nineteen:

“ ‘ And they also had horses, and asses, and there were elephants and *cureloms* and *cumoms*; all of which were useful unto man; and more especially the elephants and *cureloms* and *cumoms*.’ ”

“ What is a ‘ *curelom* ’ ? ” Cobrita asked curiously.

The Bishop paused and considered. “ I’m sorry tu say there ain’t a very great deal knowed about *cureloms*, ” he confessed. “ Y’u see, Miss, that’s the only time they’re mentioned. But I reckon the *cumoms* was just as useful. ”

By this time Mrs. Warder had recovered from her nervousness and meaning looks began to pass between herself and Imogene. In the face of a scattering fire of history Kansas and Pennsylvania, united, dug their mines and swung their big guns into line.

But the Bishop’s ardor, in the light of possible conversions, increased rather than decreased with his argument and further delvings into the Book of Mormon yielded stories of migrations, legislative disputes, and amazingly destructive wars.

“ That makes four hundred and thirty thousand people you’ve killed off in just those last four verses, ” stated Clarice accurately. “ Antionum and his ten thousand brought it up to one hundred

thousand, and Shiblem with *his* ten, and Shem, and Josh——”

“*Who?*” asked Imogene sharply.

The Bishop smiled as easily as the others, but with superior knowledge. “That’s nothing tu wut comes later when they gits *real* hosstyle——”

“*What* is your position on Polygamy?” asked Mrs. Warder heavily and distinctly.

The Bishop looked slightly disconcerted. For the first time he seemed to feel the existence of an opposing element and his close-set eyes darted a look at the lady’s face. There was nothing there.

“Plurality of wives is ag’in the Law,” he answered sourly. “The Commandment was give tu the Lamanites—Jacob, Three, Five.”

“But is it not a fact that many of you are polygamists?” came the unevadable question.

“Yes, ma’am,” he answered, reddening. “I ain’t denying that’s all so, but——”

“Are *you* a polygamist?” persisted the relentless Philadelphian.

While the troubled missionary fumbled for a quasi-truthful reply, Imogene advanced an ingenious theory.

“It’s mighty hard to keep servants out here. Perhaps——”

The gale of protest which swallowed up the sentence served to put the Bishop on his feet again. If he had misgivings as to Imogene's sincerity, they were still unnoticeable.

"I ain't stating if I am or am not," he replied deviously. "Ether, he says, 'The Gentile will mock at these things'—and, Twelve, Twenty-five, 'Fools shall mock, but they shall mourn.'"

"Just who was this Ether man?" asked Imogene, growing restive under the insinuation.

The Bishop ruffled his pages zealously and got back on the safe ground of history once more. "Ether was a descendant of Coriantor," he said:

" 'And Coriantor was the son of Moron,
And Moron was the son of Ethem,
And Ethem was the son of Ahah.' "

The Bishop's voice settled down to a steady drone. Verses Ten, Fifteen, and Twenty clicked by without a sign of fatigue. So did Twenty-five and Thirty and still he was unwinded. More than one auditor heaved a sigh. The genealogical tree of Ether was certainly no scrubby growth.

" 'And Shule was the son of Kib,' " read the Bishop.

"Oh, let me turn the crank for a while," interrupted Imogene irascibly. "I'll bet I've read that myself, somewhere:

"And Kib was the son of Dub,
And Dub was the son of Mutt,
And Mutt was the son of Gun,
And——"

"That sort of *sounds* right," the Bishop said doubtfully, "but still it ain't quite according to——"

"According to Ether," supplied the thoroughly wearied Strong Woman, as she grappled finally with the Bishop's awakening eye. "Well, I guess if we've got to take 'Ether' we ain't any of us going to be Mormons—not before dinner time, anyway. We'd rather take *chloroform!*"

With Imogene's last word the strain under which they labored became too heavy and the group of women broke into a whirl of laughter. As the Bishop, with reddening face, clutched his book shut and sprang to his feet, the unmistakable sounds beat upon him from every side. Waves of it swept over him and gales of it swirled round him, with an occasional scream of delight for good

THE DESERT AND MRS. AJAX 187

measure. Heartless though it was, the sight of Earnest Man discomfited by their idling selves was too much for their gravity and they laughed till they cried, and sent up blind pæans of joy from each other's shoulders.

The Bishop stood not on the order of his going. One angry look behind him as he flung away down the steps—one red, clenched fist brandished impotently in the air as he hastily mounted and disappeared in a cloud of dust, was all that he offered the unregenerate scoffers as farewell.

Mr. Peters, having seen his friendships in the Bull Valley Stake lessened forever by one, chewed thoughtfully on a blade of grass and betook himself elephantwards.

"Mebbe that will remind Moroni of that mine he got me tu put my money into a year ago," he muttered. "It was all the money I had, I reckon. I remember, now, I'd saved it up tu send away. But *was* it last year?" He paused awhile in reflection. "Why, no, y'u old fool! Nor the year before that! Nor *five* years. Nor ten!" Drybone's face tightened up like a withered parchment, as if there were not already lines enough. Something blazed up within him for a moment—then the spasm passed. He was staring off across

the sleepy, hazy desert, at the rocking mountains and the blue-veiled plain. "Oh, well," said Drybone. "Oh, well."

Mrs. Warder's eyes followed the cloud of dust that rose for a long time in the Bishop's wake.

"Do you know," she said to Imogene, when the two were alone, "I don't believe the Bishop was surprised one bit to find so many women here. I think he just made that up. I'm quite sure he's been thinking of this—er—er——"

"Outfit?"

"Oh, thank you. (Dear me, what a funny little word!) This outfit as a fertile field for proselyting for several weeks. You see, my dear Mrs. Boggs, that sort of thing would come very naturally to a circus."

"Would it?" and the Strong Woman began to listen with acute attention.

"Yes," the other continued, all unwarned. "Ignorant though the Bishop undoubtedly is, he probably knows that there are some classes more amenable than others to his arguments and his polygamous instincts would enable him to find them out. I have often thought that in any sphere of life where there is a tendency towards—er—er—carelessness in—er—er——"

"I'm afraid I don't quite understand," said Imogene with a heavy frown.

"I mean," said Mrs. Warder, "that traveling actors and actresses are subject to great——"

"SEE HERE!" said the Strong Woman vigorously; "YOU CAN STOP THAT RIGHT NOW! There's something wrong here that's got to be cleared up. If you don't think—if *anybody* don't think that circus people are just about simon-pure all *right* in their lives it's time they were educated, good and proper." Whereupon the strong-eyed Kansan centered the other's wavering gaze and delivered herself of certain forceful remarks.

Sometime later Amy Radnor came upon her aunt sitting all alone in a corner of the veranda, a look of mingled fright and bewilderment on her face.

"Sit down by me here, Amy," she said in a fluttering voice. "I have just been learning some of the most amazing things."

"Have you been talking with Imogene?" asked Amy with a smile.

"I have," her aunt replied, "and she tells me now, among other things, that 'Emperor,' who is a big snake in a box just outside my door, is a great pet of Miss Cobrita, who is going to marry

the younger of the two Italians. Now, the curious part of it is that Miss Cobrita is so attached to this snake that she simply cannot bear to leave it, or even dispose of it in any way, while Angelo, so Imogene says, has no use for snakes in the house at all. So—and I must say I think it uncommonly good of them—they're going to put off their marriage *till the snake dies!*"

A heel with a tinkling spur clinked on the threshold behind them, and Miss Belvawney stepped out with a smile and an affectionate touch of her gauntleted hand on Amy's shoulder.

Clarice was off for Moab on the Polly horse. Down on the *mesa* the air would be sweet for another hour before the sun began its work; the long arroyo beds would still be freshly shadowed on one side. Perhaps, in some wind-still nook, she would come across the crimson cup of a cactus flower, flaming alone in a bed of golden sand. But there would be more to the girl's ride than this, for when the wind blew across the plain she would turn and face it eagerly, her clear eyes opened wide, her red lips parted. She knew whence he came, this wondrous, vast-bodied lover,—blowing, blowing unendingly across the ranges. Spiced for a day in palm-fringed isles and salted over the spar-

ling blue miles of the Pacific, he lingered a while, softening, among the orange groves, and then streamed to her through the fingers of the hazy peaks—cleaned and dried and tanged with the scent of far-off worlds.

She threw out her arms to him—this unseen, formless, never-failing friend, as if to clutch something closer to her strong young body. When the soft fingers brushed her cheek, something within her wonderful body cried out—an unconscious hungering for motherhood—a love for life and life-giving—a thirsting to give and to keep on giving back her vital forces into this marvelous world.

All this was in the girl as she stood there by her pony in the dazzling morning light—it lay in the splendid swell of her shoulders under the white waist, in the fine curve of her back and hips. Best of all, it showed in her shining eyes as she swung up to her saddle with the cavalry mount that Holly had taught her. And Amy—poor Amy—saw it.

“That young person’s clothes seem to fit her rather well,” was Mrs. Warder’s comment as she took up her work-bag. “Her riding-skirt even looked tailor-made.”

“But it *isn’t*,” refuted Amy plaintively, as she

turned away to go to her room. "She sent her measure away and got it by mail, just as she does *everything*, and when they come she simply steps right *into* them. And I have to take in and take in till there's no end to it."

It was not yet noon when Clarice trotted down Moab's quiet street under the trees and tied her pony in front of Buckner's store. She had come to Moab to find out, once for all, if Macklin had had two hundred dollars or anything like that sum that day in February, three years before, when he had bought his outfit to go prospecting. Ever since the details had been hers to know the girl had felt the solution of the problem to rest on this one contingency, and the time had come when her small plots must be carried to a quick finish. Passing behind the counter, she found the storekeeper behind the pigeon-holes of the post office, frowning into his books in an attempt to reconcile his cash with the contents of his safe.

"Just the young lady I was looking for," he remarked, with an engaging smile. "I'm wondering if y'u could help me find a small sum in these yere accounts of mine? There seems tu be a small deeficit in the Post-office Cash that must have slipped into the store till some way, and—well—

THE DESERT AND MRS. AJAX 193

there's a chance for an Inspector soon—so I thought——”

The faintest of faint gleams showed in the girl's eye. “I shall be very glad to help you—provided it doesn't take too long,” the circus woman replied, and forced herself to draw off her gauntlets with languid nonchalance. The luck of the thing was incredible! Here was her chance all made to order, and fairly screaming to her to be taken up! She almost choked with emotion.

“How did you balance last week?” she heard herself asking, and smiled at the man as she never knew she smiled at anyone.

“Clost tu a nickel,” was Buckner's dazed reply as he gave up his rat's nest of a desk to the radiant young person at his elbow. “That's what's got me puzzled.”

“*Please*, Mr. Buckner,” she said decisively, “I can't help you at all if you stand there fussing with things. Give me your books and the correct cash on hand, then leave me alone for a *good* half-hour. Go up in the front of the store and don't let *anyone* interrupt me, including your good self,” she added firmly.

“That's the talk,” was the man's answer. “You're the kind of a woman I'd like tu have

around yere all the time. Help yourself tu the safe—the books are all there. And, say—it's forty-seven-seventy I'm 'out,' and if y'u find it——”

“If I find it I'll keep it, so run along, Mr. Bad Bookkeeper,” she answered, with delicious insolence, and fluttered her eyelids over a blinding look. “If I want you, I'll call you—George.”

“That's it—*call* me ‘George,’” said the father of ten incoherently, and walked regretfully away.

Left to herself in the frowsy den among a year's accumulation of postal trash, samples of groceries, and dust-covered invoices, the girl felt a sudden thrill of fear. Out of all that litter of useless records she had to find one small book, and that book more than three years old—the day-book, not the ledger. The ledger account of a man suspected of a crime might be headed in a dozen different ways, but the yellow counter-book in which the storekeeper hastily penciled his memos would probably be found unaltered—if it were found.

For five frantic minutes the woman of the circus dug through the stack of records. It seemed as if the storekeeper, with all the hoarding instincts of a mountain rat, had appropriated every ownerless article that had caught his eye, from a

THE DESERT AND MRS. AJAX 195

seed catalogue, edited by a joyous optimist wearing glasses magnifying to ten diameters, to a was-trel copy of "Proctor Knott on Duluth." Discouraging though it was to find no clue, the very accumulation of such trash seemed to argue that the book was somewhere in the office, and so, after a cautious look down the room at Buckner nibbling meditatively on a prune, she dropped on her knees before the safe.

Hardly had she done so when her hands clutched at a stack of battered volumes which filled the middle compartment—the missing day-books! No longer of any possible use, but saved up against some vague emergency with the same miserly instincts that coveted a sample cigar sent through the mails—and added it to stock.

Clarice snatched up a book at random and flirted back its cover. "April, 1906," it said. Another, and "August, 1905," met her eye. With returning exultation she dove into one after another—searched with frantic anxiety for February, 1904—and found it!

Trembling with suspense, the girl studied the first page, turned it like a flash, and raced down the second. "Feb. 3rd," said the heading, and her careful eyes threaded down through the maze of

196 THE DESERT AND MRS. AJAX

scrawls until, midway on the yellow page, misspelled and cramped, blurred almost to erasure, she saw the longed-for *caption*, "J. Maklin."

The circus woman struggled through the items one by one. "*Bns*," she read, and "*Bcn*" 10 lbs—then "*Cfee*," and "*Tob*," \$1.00. The others, all but the last, were undecipherable. But when she had interpreted that which footed the page and rounded out the record of a prospecting trip prepared for in the usual way, she found evidence of that condition chronic among most prospectors and without exception encountered by their trustful backers. "Cash—\$10.00."

"*Cash, ten dollars.*" Not fifty, nor sixty, nor two hundred dollars borrowed in a hasty moment to buy another man's claim, but only—ten. The girl's eyes grew bright with victory. SHE HAD WON! Instinctively she tore the leaf from the book and hid it in her waist.

Voices were audible inside the store now, and Buckner was coming her way along his counter with a tall stranger at his heels, but in place of the vivid emotions of a moment ago a feeling of angelic calm pervaded Miss Belvawney's being, and while her cool glances ran down the store-keeper's attempt at a balance, she smiled sweetly

to herself and hummed a circus tune. Quickly finding the error, she tossed her pencil away, picked up whip and gauntlets, and walked out into the store.

"You wrote 'fifty-three dollars' instead of 'five-thirty,'" she said with a laugh which joy turned into a musical ripple. "The difference makes your forty-seven-seventy. Which will you give me—the forty-seven, or the seventy?"

"Fine—fine!" exclaimed the store-man, rubbing his hands delightedly. "I'll leave all that tu y'u, Miss Clarice—or just help yourself tu the candy in the barrel. Allow me tu make y'u acquainted with Mister—Mister——"

"Whitley—Jack Whitley is my name, sir," the stranger responded in a pleasant, dignified drawl, removing his hat without impairing its symmetrical dents and gazing admiringly at the girl over the hand which stroked a long mustache.

"You're a stranger here, aren't you, Mr. Whitley?" the girl asked with interest, for the man reminded her strongly of Holly.

"I'm down here from Idyho, ma'am," Mr. Whitley made haste to reply under the unconscious challenge of the girl's wonderful vigor. "A little business with the Sheriff, maybe."

198 THE DESERT AND MRS. AJAX

"So you're bad up in Idaho, too," mocked the red-lipped vision, impudently, while compelling eyes held his own enchained. "You don't *look* like a bad man, Mr. Whitley. How does it feel to be captured?"

"Oh, it ain't me. *I* ain't captured at all," stammered the blushing victim. "Leastways, not by no *Sheriff*, ma'am. I'm seeing that if I stayed much in these parts I might try a little 'capturing' myself."

"Then you are *after* someone. Who is it?"

"A fellow that shot a man down here—a long time ago," the Whitley person answered helplessly, and marveled to see the glorious dark eyes open still wider. "That's why I'm going to Bullion-field—on the quiet," he added freely, then realized it would be no longer "on the quiet."

"But you're surely not going over there *to-day*?" the beautiful stranger queried, while the eyes beguiled the Whitley heart again. "It's a long ride without watering—forty miles or more. You go near the Holly Ranch, you know. Perhaps——" She left the sentence in the air and, with an arch glance, hurried towards the door and escape. He was a very good-looking man, with his down-drooping mustache and his pleasantly

THE DESERT AND MRS. AJAX 199

respectful eyes—for a short-time flirtation Clarice felt that she had probably broken all known records.

“I don’t know just where that ‘Holly’ ranch is,” a pleasant voice remarked with amused meaning as, with her pony untied, she turned to mount and found him holding her stirrup, “but if tomorrow ever comes I reckon it’ll be mighty hard *not* to find!”

Some time during the night of this eventful day the light-sleeping Miss Radnor was wakened by a touch and a whisper. Starting up nervously among her pillows, she was amazed to find Miss Belvawney kneeling by her bedside.

“Amy, dearest,” said Clarice, “I *do* hate to wake you up, but there’s something I simply *must* know. It’s very important. It’s more than that,” and her hand went over the coverlet to clutch the other’s, “it’s really *terribly* serious.”

“Mercy my!” ejaculated the thin girl wonderingly. “What is it, Clarice dear?”

“Well,” said Clarice, in a whisper, “Amy, this is it. Are you a good *flirt*?”

The Philadelphian gasped indignantly and sat bolt upright in bed. “Do you mean to say that you waked me up in the middle of——”

"S-s-s-h!" commanded the Belvawney as she put a warning finger to her lips, her eyes big and lustrous in the moonlight. "This isn't a joke. I'm in dead earnest——"

"Why!" broke in Amy. "You've got your *riding* things on! Where *are* you going at this time of night?"

The circus girl's gauntlet tightened on Amy's wrist. "Never mind where. I've left a note tied to the kitchen stove-lifter for Imogene that explains. All I want to know is—will you help me?"

The thin girl's lips twitched with laughter and she dropped down among her pillows again and stared at the tragic face.

"There's a *man* coming here to-morrow!" the Belvawney whispered dramatically. "I've forgotten his name, but he has a nice mustache—*perhaps* he'll ask for me. The minute you see him go right out and say, 'I don't know where she is, but I think she will be home very soon'—and then keep him here as long as ever you can. Now, **PROMISE!**"

"I promise," said Amy with a choke. "Please don't break my hand all to pieces. Oh, come here, silly—don't run away. CLARICE! Tell

me something. Don't you love him *terribly?*"

"O-h-h-h-h! Do you think I'd do this if I didn't?" and she dropped on her knees and flung a hugging arm round the other. "Oh! Amy, isn't it *splendid* when you love someone? You just want to *sacrifice*—and *give up*—and *work*—and be devoured by fire or drowned in ice-water if it will do any good. Sometimes it makes you feel, oh, so *strong*! And then, almost right away, your knees get wobbly and you just turn into a cobblestone inside. And one minute he's looking at you in the most *wonderful* way, and you feel as if you were floating on a lovely pink cloud, eating ice cream smothered in violets, and the *next* thing you know something terrible happens and *everything* goes to pieces, and you see that he *doesn't* love you, after all,—and—oh-h-h-h!" The circus woman's cry sounded perilously like despair, her soft lips brushed the other's cheek, she gave a last convulsive squeeze, and stood up, flicking her whip against her spurred heel.

Under the flooding moonlight the pale oval of her face, framed in the masses of dark hair against her sombrero, seemed to glow with an unearthly beauty. Her eyes were like lustrous pools

202 THE DESERT AND MRS. AJAX

in a creamy blur that was marked out only by the freshness of her lips. All the eagerness, the daring, the flashing *élan* of her wild spirit were in her unconscious pose. To the timid Easterner she seemed a beautiful creature, all fire and light, or like some bright blade flashing from its scabbard to a comrade's aid. And soon this wonderful person would be out there all alone on the desert, riding on and on in the blue-gray stillness under the stars, fearless of accidents or distance or losing her way; steadily pressing on into the night to help the man she loved.

"*Well,*" said the adoring thin one impetuously as she pounded her pillow with ferocity, "you've got me so stirred up that I'll never sleep again, which will probably mar my fatal beauty for its work to-morrow, but I'll do my best to fascinate the unknown. The man who wouldn't fall in love with *you* on sight is an idiot."

CHAPTER X

OVER in Bullionfield Dick Holly, Wiley the superintendent, and the two Warders, still proudly wearing their candle-greased khaki, were gathered around the drafting-table in the office of the Yellow Dog. A box of cigars, a syphon, a bowl of cracked ice, and a bottle of rye stood on the table among the maps and blue-prints. Now and then Wiley puffed smoke across a map while he estimated a distance and answered a question.

"You see," Holly explained to Warder, "we had to prove ourselves free of the Atlas vein at either one time or other. Now that we've done it we know where we stand. Nobody stands a ghost of a show in buying the Atlas for an apex claim now; in fact, I wouldn't let a white man waste his money. But while this Macklin man has got good ground, we'll have to keep him from knowing just how good it is. If we close this deal to-morrow it won't be a minute too soon. Some night one of our tunnel men will get full and it will all come out. Every hour we leave this thing open raises the chances against us."

204 THE DESERT AND MRS. AJAX

Warder, not knowing what was in the other's mind, only thought fifteen thousand rather high for an undeveloped claim.

"He'll take whatever we give him," he said shrewdly. "We've got him going."

"I'd rather pay the difference between fifteen and five than lose the chance at several hundred thousand," was the reply. "And if anything *happens* and he finds out what we've proved, where will all these other properties soar to—Red Rock and Daisy and Atlas Extension? It would look like the start of that balloon race you took me to see in Fairmount Park."

"Right," was the laconic answer. "We'll get busy and close it up to-morrow. Probably some of those other claims could also be picked up at fairly cheap figures."

Up until this time Biddle had followed the trend of the plans fairly well, but after his second highball, he remembered that while the mine had been explored the town of Bullionfield was still uninvestigated.

"And so you think we might take in the Extension to advantage?" his father was saying. "Oh, going out, Biddle?"

"Just for some cigarettes," the boy replied.

THE DESERT AND MRS. AJAX 205

"I'm sorry we don't inhale," his father commented. "Better load up with good cigars before you go. Well, now about this Atlas Extension——" and the door swung shut upon the smoked-wreathed three.

It was the Easterner's first experience in a mining camp, and as he picked his way down the shadowy trail towards the town shining in the gulch below under a flood of moonlight, he breathed the sweet night air with a new zest. The blurred ranges rimming the basin with their dark bulk, the vague desert sweeping off to the north, with its suggestions of freedom and hidden wealth and solitude, began to fascinate him. He felt himself truly on the fringe of civilization, in a remote nook of the world where Young Blood and Chance and Danger ran their riotous course unrestrained.

Thus it was the Silver Grill, instead of the dingy lobby of the hotel, which claimed him and the few gold pieces he fed onto its green cloth, and after that, the Green Front and the Lone Star and the dubious Red Onion. In the latter place he watched until the silent Chesterfield who presided over the faro game had turned up the "low" card thrice in succession. Then Biddle

206 THE DESERT AND MRS. AJAX

delved into his pocket and quickly bet on the "high," brusquely thrusting his hand over the shoulders of the wordless devotees and dropping his coin on the table with a noisome clatter that plainly disturbed their meditations. Whereupon the heavy-eyed dealer rebuked him, with a slow, estimating look and further rebuked him, much to his distress, by turning up the low card some six times running.

"I've saw it do that and *then* get worse," a sympathetic voice murmured nearby. An engaging individual, the brilliancy of whose smile was slightly dimmed by a three days' beard, was walking at his side. Rather pleased than otherwise to have a companion, Biddle found himself replying, and by means of unconscious mind-readings, or else it was the genial one's impelling elbow, they presently arrived at the bar. While they stood there it was seen that the man had but one eye.

"A little whirl at the games comes easy to us mining men," the new friend remarked in tones that reminded Biddle that he was now of that profession. "The minute I see you I says to myself, 'There's a natural born gambler—mines or cyards—he don't care which.'"

"No," said Biddle languidly, "it's all the same to me. When I'm tired of one I go to the other."

"*Ex-actly,*" and the man doubled up with a noiseless laugh. "That's the way they tell us—the world over. But speaking of mines, now," and he deftly extracted a fragment of rock from his pocket, "as one mining man to another, *what* would be your opinion on *that?*"

Biddle's skin prickled a little, but he took the rock and studied it. "Fairly high-grade, I should say. Where did it come from?"

The unknown clutched at his elbow.

"Pardner," he said in hushed tones, "you'll never believe it! *Right off this hill behind us!* I knocked that rock off the outcrop of the Atlas Extension at four o'clock this very afternoon." He glanced warily about, then nudged the other. "Let's take a mope," he said. "This place is too popular."

Once on the street the one-eyed man exploded with excitement. "I struck it just by luck," he whispered hoarsely. "I've got an option on the claim for a few thousand dollars and was picking around up there and found this bully little rock." He paused and then gave vent to a cynical laugh.

"It's great big luck, all right, and yet it ain't luck at all—fer *me*. But even if I can't make good on the option, do you figger I'd tell *them* what they've got—and have them open up a lead of picture rock—and let *them* lah-di-dah around in their ottomobiles and take their trips to old New York and gay Paree? Do you reckon I'd let *them* get away with a good thing like this? No, sir. No, sirree! I ain't that partickler kind of an oyster, no I ain't! I just says to myself, says I, 'You're broke and you know it, all along of cyards and sech trash, but mebbe if you'll stay sober long enough you'll find some feller that *knows* good dirt and *he'll* take it off your hands and give you a little something for your trouble. And if you *don't* find any feller like that, then you lay almighty low and squirm around and try every way you kin to get that there option extended——"

"What was the purchase price?" Biddle broke in.

"Three thousand iron men," was the mournful reply. "It's a regular crime, now, ain't it? Oh, you can't take a look at that little rock and tell *me*. No, sirree. You know too much about these things and so do I."

The one-eyed man clutched off his hat and ran his hand despairingly through his hair, while his single orb rolled in a fine frenzy.

"Why, Sacred Pickles!" he moaned; "if there ain't but an inch over three foot of that ore she's worth fifty thousand of any man's money! But, pardner—look at me! Look at them shoes! Mebbe they really are shoes—and mebbe it's only a compliment to my family. And look at this yere hat! *Some* calls it a hat, but the top falls in and the brim flops up and rightly considered it ain't a gentleman's hat at all. But *don't* look at the hat—look at *me*—with every red cent in the world foolishd away at 'Stud' and then tell a feller what he's going to do. Oh, *I* know—just as well as you. I've got to sell and I've got to sell *cheap*, but I tell you it *hurts!*"

Standing there in the moonlight before so faultless an exhibition of despair, the Philadelphian began to thrill a little over his remarkable luck. Three thousand dollars would be a very low figure for a claim in the Yellow Dog group, and fully two thousand less than his father was willing to pay. Biddle began to see an opportunity for a small deal inside the family. Another moment and he had decided. All these mining

matters had to be handled decisively and quickly, he knew.

"What do you want for your option?" he asked.

The eye ceased its rolling and grew almost tearful. There were profane lamentations and mention of five hundred dollars.

"I'll give you *two* hundred," said Biddle.

The one-eyed man exhibited his soleless shoes again and laughed a bitter laugh. "She's all yours," he answered mournfully. "You couldn't let me have part of it to-night, could you? I'll give you a quit claim to my rights when we go before a Notary in the morning."

"I don't mind," said Biddle. "By the way, what did you say your name was?"

"Brewster," said the one-eyed man. "I reckon I don't know you so very well, either."

"My name is Warder," the Philadelphian replied.

"No wonder you wanted that option," the other exclaimed with an admirable start. "I ort to have stood out for more."

"Too late now," said Biddle, quickly passing over some bills.

"Yep. Too late now," sighed Mr. Brewster,

accepting the money with profound regret. "But that's the way she goes. Well, good-night! See you in the morning—right here on this very spot—at eight o'clock. Now, don't forget!"

As Biddle climbed the trail to the office he could hardly repress his exultation. People would learn more about him and his eye to opportunities in the morning.

"This desert is certainly a great place," he remarked genially to Holly, meditating alone on the porch. "I wasn't much for it at first, but now I see there's something in it, after all."

"It takes a little work sometimes to get it out," the other replied gravely. "But it is pleasant to hear that you have become interested in the mining idea."

"Mining is all right," said Biddle. "I used to think it was principally luck, but I consider now that all it needs is the same cold, hard sense you would apply to any commercial proposition."

"Yes. 'Sense' is good," admitted the ranchman, "and sometimes it's lucky to have a sort of 'sixth' sense hanging round. A newspaper man once told me that mining was 'the science of intelligent conjecture.' Wasn't it funny how he got to know all that? They were mighty big words

212 THE DESERT AND MRS. AJAX

for just a little pay-ore. Did you find something of interest in our little town?"

"I think so," said Biddle, feeling that the other was a little too strong for him. "Good-night."

The moon rode higher into the violet vault and filled the star-shot night with a gray gleaming. Under its softening touch the squat cabins of the town, blurred into shadowy picturesqueness, seemed to huddle together on the hillside like a band of night-herded cattle, while vague in the opaline mystery of the desert, the giant bulk of the mountains rose up as if from the wash of a silent, blue-gray sea.

It had come to Holly, and not without a sense of relief, that he wouldn't be able to prove anything against old Joey, after all. His investigators having brought him nothing definite so far, he further knew that the Sheriff's evidence would be similarly weak, and he only feared the latter's actions for the useless stir they would produce. The thing to do right now was to get the old man out of camp so that no accident could ever reveal his identity to Clarice. But if, on the other hand, Jake decided to take the man into custody without any genuine proof—well, the desert was wide and

trails were dim. Twenty-four hours' start and Jake would have a job on his hands—the girl asleep over there behind the hills was going to be kept unsullied at all hazards even if Dick Holly had to break the law to do it.

A figure sauntered up the trail with its hands in its pockets and drew near to the house by leisurely progressions.

Holly took his feet down from the railing and shouldered up out of his chair. "Hello, there, Jake. Come up and sit down."

"I reckon not," said the Sheriff. "I only wanted tu tell y'u that I can't hold off any longer—my man Whitley will be here to-morrow. If you're figuring on a little jumping—well, it's a nice, clear night—you'd better go tu it."

"No use," said the ranchman crisply. "You haven't got anything on him, and neither have I. Take my advice, partner, and give it up. The trail's too old."

"The boys are looking for doings," the Sheriff replied.

"Jake," broke in Holly strongly, "why don't you let this fellow go? He's an old man and can't do any harm. Why not call it off? You know me and you know that if there was the ghost

of a show to get that claim without paying for it I'd take it quicker than One-eyed Brewster will take a drink. What does this man of yours know about Macklin, anyway?"

"It's more what he knows about Danny Drew," was Jake's surprising reply. "Macklin claims he bought Drew out, but *this* man says Drew wrote him the day he left to go prospecting and refused to sell the Atlas *at any price*."

"Oh, well," retorted Holly good-humoredly, "you know and I know that the average prospector isn't real happy until he can refuse a big offer and then accept ten per cent. of it six months later. Why, Charley Phillips over in the *Booster* office has a pet sentence set up all the time waiting for some new strike so that he can say, 'It is reported that the owners of this claim have already refused an offer going well into six figures.' I guess your letter-writing friend is only accepting a chance to inspect a new camp free of expense."

"I'm just tellin' y'u," the Sheriff retorted. "I didn't know y'u were figurin' on being *particeps criminis*, Dick. Y'u couldn't favor the old rat more if y'u were soft on his daughter—I've heard he had a family," with which unanswerable re-

mark the Law in Bullionfield put its hands back in its pockets and meandered pensively away.

The ranchman watched the departing figure with a thoughtful expression on his face. So there *was* a case against Macklin, after all. The fat was in the fire with a vengeance! It would take quick work to-morrow to save it. "Good old Jake," he murmured as he turned away to bed. "He's been mighty square with me. Too bad I've got to fool him now."

When six o'clock in the morning came Biddle was wide awake and by seven he was shaved and dressed and looking out of his window at the town. Viewed in the searching light of a Nevada morning, the camp seemed to lack some of the flavor it had owned under darkness, but he had no trouble in picking out the Red Onion, where Mr. Brewster would be waiting for him at eight sharp, the more easily because the daily stage for Ami was at that moment about to start from the same spot. There seemed to be some slight delay in leaving this morning, but after a partially intoxicated passenger had finally been induced to forsake the enticements of the hostelry, the driver let his brake go with a slam, and the stage departed.

216 THE DESERT AND MRS. AJAX

Biddle arrived in front of the Red Onion at eight-five. At eight-fifteen, there being no Mr. Brewster in sight, he looked inside. At eight-thirty he was strolling up and down the street, the better to rid himself of a disturbing suspicion. At nine o'clock he walked into the Onion and asked abruptly if Mr. Brewster had been seen that day.

The bartender appraised him with a competent eye and continued polishing his glasses. After a proper interval, during which it was borne in on the Philadelphian that in these Western States your true gentleman is jealous of his poise, he was asked if, perchance, it might be Mr. "One-eyed" Brewster whom he sought.

"He certainly had one eye," said Biddle irascibly. "And somebody's got a hundred dollars of my good money."

At this the barman raised his eyebrows a fraction of an inch and coughed faintly. "I'm right glad y'u mentioned that," he said with some relief. "One-eye and his curious hundred dollars had us so puzzled last night that we were all counting our rolls. I guess I can locate at least *part* of it for you."

"Oh, you *can?*" said Biddle hopefully.

"Yes," said the other thoughtfully. "I know I've got about twenty-five of it—and the graveyard shift on the faro bank took in ten more. That would make, say, thirty-five. Then, the stage fare from here to Ami is *five*—that's forty altogether——" He paused and frowned over a disgusting possibility. "I wonder if it's really *possible* that we let One-eye get away from us with sixty real dollars in his clothes?"

Biddle waited to hear no more. As he passed out into the street he stepped on something that rolled under his foot, and when he looked down angrily he recognized it as the one-eyed man's fragment of "high-grade," which, having served its purpose, had been blithely tossed away. With a faintly tingling sensation about his ears Biddle realized that it was entirely unnecessary to make inquiry into the ownership of the Atlas Extension, or as to certain valuable options that would presently expire. He had been gulled as easily as any yokel who ever raised the walnut-shell to find the little pea.

Retracing his steps to the mine office, his discomfort was not lessened by the fact that his father and the two miners were waiting for him in a rather pregnant silence.

218 THE DESERT AND MRS. AJAX

"Biddle," said his father, with a strange, sharp note in his voice, "what's this we hear about your going around town last night buying up claims?"

"I didn't buy any claims," the son answered with a troubled look. "I was just—just trying to get an option, that was all."

"Oh, you and your *options!*" his father barked angrily. "Do you know what you with your kid notions have done to us? You've got the whole town laughing over the way this man skinned you out of your money and you've raised the price of every claim we wanted by at least a hundred per cent. And that isn't all, by any means."

"Wha-wha-what's the matter now?" faltered Biddle, unable to take his eyes from his father's reddened face.

"The matter's just this," roared Warder, shaking a lead pencil under his son's nose. "You snapped at the Atlas Extension so hard that Macklin will go up in the air again and we'll *never* get him down. If you wanted to be the cause of my losing fifty thousand dollars, why, in the name of Time didn't you say so, and I'd have *given* you the money. If you want any more of your precious options, for Heaven's sake go out on a dry lake

and mine for crab apples, where you'll be out of the way."

The father's keen eye searched his son's face for a moment longer. "If I thought you were really trying anything funny I'd ship you back to Philadelphia," he said in calmer tones. "I guess you've got to be educated. This business we're in is a little different from sewing rabbits on a card in a kindergarten."

Holly pointed out of the window.

"Here comes Patterson with Joey now. Perhaps we can do something along the original lines in spite of his rainbow ideas."

"I hope so," remarked Warder père. "I don't want you to lose money on *my* account. Come right in, Mr. Macklin."

The moment Macklin stepped inside the door the ranchman knew that something had happened. The old man's beard was as matted as before and his nose was as red as ever, but the confident light in his eye was too strong to proceed from so small a thing as Biddle's mistake. At other times the arrogance with which the Atlas man tilted his chair back and smilingly produced a cigar would have been only ridiculous, but this time it was backed up by something tangible. Holly thought

of the two precious weeks wasted while he was hunting for evidence that now he couldn't use, and his lips tightened. He wondered why Fate had concentrated the source of all his troubles in this miserable shell of a man, and yet tantalizingly stood him off from a decent vengeance.

"Joey," said he, "we all know what we're here for and we might as well get down to business. As I told you two weeks ago, the Yellow Dog Company is ready to buy your Atlas claim. We'll give you fifteen thousand dollars, spot cash."

The old man's lips parted in a knowing and unpleasantly ugly grin. "Push it up," he said laconically. "Y'u offered me forty thousand once—y'u'll offer it again."

"Feeling pretty strong this morning, are you?" the ranchman asked ironically. "Where do you get these ideas?"

Macklin puffed out a cloud of smoke and held his cigar aloft between two crooked talons. "I gets my ideas from two things," he answered with studied insolence, "and the fust of 'em is that since last night proputties, generally, in this yere camp has *riz*."

"We're here for business, not foolishness,"

said Holly sharply. "What's your other reason?"

With a gleam of triumph in his eye Macklin let his chair slowly down on all four legs. "Because," he answered, as he tapped off the words with a bony forefinger on Holly's knee, "*I know what you've got in your winze in the tunnell!*"

Truth or untruth as this startling announcement might prove to be, neither the ranchman nor Warder nor even the silent Wiley blinked an eyelid. But Biddle quickly saw that the thing was impossible.

"You couldn't know," he stated. "We've got a watchman there."

The Atlas man laughed out with unholy glee and slapped his leg.

"Thanks, young feller; thanks," he said. "Forty thousand is my price. Take it or leave it, just as y'u please."

Before Warder père could begin a fitting rejoinder a rather rueful acceptance of conditions seemed to spread itself over Holly's face.

"Of course, you would have a right to your ideas," Warder heard his partner saying, "even if we told you that you *didn't* know what we've got, but before we go any further we'll ask you to

222 THE DESERT AND MRS. AJAX

show us that the claim is yours to sell. Let's see," said the ranchman, while the old man nodded in cheerful appreciation, "didn't you buy this claim from a man named Drew?"

"That's right," came the reply. "Danny Drew—just afore he went tu Idyho."

"But Drew didn't get to Idaho," was the objection.

"Right. I know that," old Joey answered alertly. "Some feller shot him."

"Y-e-e-s. I guess we're all pretty sure of that by now," Holly agreed. "But did you happen to know that Drew was offered a large sum for the claim about the time that you bought it from him?"

The question sounded rather queer to Warder. Something in the ranchman's face, though perhaps it was its utter lack of expression, told him that another element had been drawn into the game. Who was this man "Drew"—and why had he been shot? What was Holly trying to do to Macklin? What had Macklin to do with Drew? The Philadelphian's mouth took on its slit-like look.

The old man cleared his throat before replying. Sitting still in his chair, with his eyes fixed on

Holly, he made answer without a trace of emotion.

"Yes," he said evenly. "I've heard some say he was made an offer about that time."

"That's right," continued the inquisitor, "and since you're aware of *that*, you must also know that this offer was made *before* you bought the claim."

"Yes," said the old man again, with the same curious calmness. "I know that."

"Hmmmm," said Holly thoughtfully. He paused long enough to let the halt gather weight, and then suddenly put out a hand and gripped the other's knee. "*And do you know, too, that Drew refused that offer?*"

Like a flash, both Warder and Wiley riveted their eyes on Macklin's face. The trap which the silent superintendent had been grimly waiting for and which the Philadelphian now almost understood had been deftly set. Would he walk into it?

"Yes, and I know that, too, Mister Goodplayer!" the old man retorted, with the rising snarl of a cornered animal. "Oh, I've been waiting for y'u tu spring that, Dick Holly, *but it won't go!* Don't think I ain't wise tu what they're sayin' about my shootin' Danny Drew, but you'll never

prove it that way, or anything about that claim, nuther, for the mighty good reason that I wrote that there refusin' letter *all by myself!* Yes, I did," he went on, leaping from his chair and shaking his fist in the ranchman's face. "That letter came into Moab post office for Danny Drew and I took it and opened it. And when I saw what he'd been offered I sat me down and I *refused* it for him, and then I went out after Drew, *and I bought that claim for myself!*"

Holly felt his partner's eye on him as he slowly took a cigar from his pocket and clipped the end. He knew Warder thought he had failed. And he was inclined to think so, himself, for he had played the only cards that he was allowing himself to-day, and old Joey had trumped them. Jake's evidence had proved worthless, just as he had expected. That which the old man had said he had done with the letter was probably true. The attempt to trap the beast and scare it into submission had proved futile. The trail was too old.

But there was a last entanglement remaining. It was the same point that the circus woman had made two days before and although he had no hopes of bringing anything to light, his sense of

fairness to Warder demanded that he make the attempt. And so he only laughed and puffed out smoke and put a repressing hand on the old man's arm.

"I wish you wouldn't get so excited," he said. "We can't do any business if you act like a jack-rabbit with the St. Vitus. All we want to know is if you bought and paid for that claim. Didn't Buckner grub-stake you on that trip?"

There were sounds in the office outside where Patterson was acting as watch-dog, but in the confusion and scraping of chairs none of the five heard the outer door open or the young engineer's quick step as he sprang up.

Again the Atlas man cleared his throat with irritating calmness and fixed a malevolent eye on the ranchman.

"Y'u asks me if a man by the name of Buckner has interests in this yere deal. I tells y'u that I buys and pays for that there claim with my own money. I pays the sum of two hundred dollars for that proputtty——"

The click of a lock broke into the sentence. Looking over Macklin's shoulder they saw Patterson with a question on his lips. But the engineer was not the only one in the outer office, for some-

one presently put a gauntleted hand against the door and opened it wide.

It was Clarice.

With a comprehensive glance which took in the occupants of the room and the situation at first sight, the woman of the circus came swiftly in and held out the proof of Macklin's poverty on that February day three years before. There was no word of explanation, or even allusion to the night's ride that they immediately knew she must have taken—nothing which thrust the girl herself into the foreground as the heroine of a rather remarkable venture. It was merely the direct action of one going about a necessary piece of business in the necessary way.

"I know you want this, Mr. Holly," she said simply, and gave him the leaf torn from Buckner's day-book. "Please look at it at once."

The ranchman started to his feet with an audible gasp. He knew instantly what had brought the girl forty miles across the desert to Bullionfield at just that time, and he also knew that he would have given anything he possessed for power to turn her arrival in that particular room into a fugitive nightmare. His face fell and he grew white. Although his hand grasped the piece of

paper instinctively, it was more because he hated the sight of it than because he wanted its evidence. He stood still for a short moment, his hand unconsciously gripping hers, his eyes full of horror over the dénouement. That grisly jester, Fate, had found a hand at last to set the noose.

Out of all those in the room only Macklin still kept his seat, nervously combing his beard with his crooked talons and grinning yellowly, while his malevolent eyes flickered suspiciously from one to the other. Perhaps it was vouchsafed him in that short moment to fathom the meaning of the woman's sudden entrance. Perhaps some vagrant memory of an account jotted down in a day-book with just such pages came to his aid with its message of warning, for while the others exclaimed and wondered the old man's feet unhooked themselves from his chair-rungs and he made ready for flight.

"Oh—*would* you?" Holly snarled, and caught and whirled him, helpless, into a corner. "We're not through with you yet, Mister Man. We've got some *other* business to transact." His hand dove swiftly into the other's pocket and wrested a revolver from the fingers which had curled round it. "Well, *lie* down then, if you can't stand up."

"Macklin," said Holly, and he held the piece

of paper torn from the day-book where the other could see it, "you didn't leave much behind you in the way of evidence when you shot Danny Drew, but you left *this*, and it can put the rope around your neck."

Warder wondered why Holly hadn't said "will," instead of "can." Wiley noticed it, too, but Wiley was moving towards the door. Wiley wanted the Atlas and wanted it cheap. Jumping claims meant action, pure and simple. But Holly gestured to him to stay.

"We're going to *buy* the Atlas, just as I said we would, Macklin—but we're going to change our terms a little. We'll give you in money—ONE DOLLAR! For your 'good and valuable considerations'—YOUR LIFE."

Warder's eyes shot open and he bit his lip, perplexed. If Holly had known about this murder business all along, why hadn't he swung the club long ago? Sixty seconds before this partner of his had been on the point of giving the man his price!

"Don't go tu hang a feller, Dick," whined the man on the floor, and clawed at Holly's boots. "I never done harm tu y'u."

Holly shook his feet free. Catching the old man

savagely by the beard, he tilted the head back till the other's blotched face was squarely under his blazing eyes.

"TAKE ANOTHER LOOK!" he shouted, with suddenly flaring rage. "Didn't you ever harm me? Who was it stole a poor widow woman's horses and outfit thirty years ago and left her stranded on the desert? Who was it took her savings and left her without a red cent to go on? Who was it turned that poor woman into a slave for the rest of her life—that made her life a hell when it ought to have been a heaven? Do you remember Hot Creek, Macklin? Do you remember the boy you left behind that day? Take another look—just as I'll take a look," and he jerked down the other's sleeve, "take another look at yourself, you snake,—and then say you never did harm to me or mine!"

Jerking the man to his feet Holly pitched him forward into a chair and snapped a silver dollar down beside him on the table. "SIGN HERE!" he shouted in the other's ear, as with one heavy hand holding him down he took a paper from Wiley and slapped it open in front of him. "For the sum of one dollar now in hand paid and other good and valuable considerations." There's a lot

230 THE DESERT AND MRS. AJAX

of doubt about how good your life is, but we'll try to make it valuable to you—and no mistake!"

With a shaking hand the old man traced a signature across the page. The Atlas was passing—passing with every wobbling letter—passing from Danny Drew to Macklin to Holly—a matter of mystery in years gone by, and now that one mystery had been solved another had sprung up to take its place. With a sickness round her heart the woman of the circus recognized the presence of some feeling far more bitter than her limited knowledge would account for. It was as if something had suddenly pierced a carefully hidden sack of gall-like acridness and let the sour liquor flow out and embitter Holly's eyes and face. She stole a second look at the ranchman's features and saw there the stoniness of an undeniable vengeance, and a consuming hate which she had not thought would ever show in such a place.

"STAND UP!" the ranchman shouted in the ear of the almost palsied man. "YOUR JOB HAS ONLY JUST BEGUN! You thought the desert was good enough for some—we'll see if it looks good to you now!"

The group parted as he pulled the other to his

feet, but Holly seemed hardly to know they were there. Passing through the outer office with the man in his clutch, he picked up a Winchester as if it were a jack-straw and let it slide into the hollow of his arm. A pair of field glasses were there, also, and he dropped them in his pocket. Then, half carrying, half pushing the man with him, he passed out of the house and down the steps towards a gulch which ran down at one side to the yellow plain.

They followed him, fascinated. Although their minds grasped the reason for this final reckoning no better than they fathomed its results, something drew them on, and as they followed, they went for the most part silently, each one alone among his thoughts.

Wiley followed for a time and then stopped and turned back.

"It's *his* deal," he said, with a shake of his head, to Clarice, coming slowly along behind. "He has got the rights, here, from what he said. Let him play it out the way he's planned."

But the circus woman, with a colorless face, passed him without recognition.

"What is he going to do with him, papa?" Biddle faltered to his father, as together they

show us that the claim is yours to sell. Let's see," said the ranchman, while the old man nodded in cheerful appreciation, "didn't you buy this claim from a man named Drew?"

"That's right," came the reply. "Danny Drew—just afore he went tu Idyho."

"But Drew didn't get to Idaho," was the objection.

"Right. I know that," old Joey answered alertly. "Some feller shot him."

"Y-e-e-s. I guess we're all pretty sure of that by now," Holly agreed. "But did you happen to know that Drew was offered a large sum for the claim about the time that you bought it from him?"

The question sounded rather queer to Warder. Something in the ranchman's face, though perhaps it was its utter lack of expression, told him that another element had been drawn into the game. Who was this man "Drew"—and why had he been shot? What was Holly trying to do to Macklin? What had Macklin to do with Drew? The Philadelphian's mouth took on its slit-like look.

The old man cleared his throat before replying. Sitting still in his chair, with his eyes fixed on

Holly, he made answer without a trace of emotion.

"Yes," he said evenly. "I've heard some say he was made an offer about that time."

"That's right," continued the inquisitor, "and since you're aware of *that*, you must also know that this offer was made *before* you bought the claim."

"Yes," said the old man again, with the same curious calmness. "I know that."

"Hmmm," said Holly thoughtfully. He paused long enough to let the halt gather weight, and then suddenly put out a hand and gripped the other's knee. "*And do you know, too, that Drew refused that offer?*"

Like a flash, both Warder and Wiley riveted their eyes on Macklin's face. The trap which the silent superintendent had been grimly waiting for and which the Philadelphian now almost understood had been deftly set. Would he walk into it?

"Yes, and I know that, too, Mister Good-player!" the old man retorted, with the rising snarl of a cornered animal. "Oh, I've been waiting for y'u tu spring that, Dick Holly, *but it won't go!* Don't think I ain't wise tu what they're sayin' about my shootin' Danny Drew, but you'll never

234 THE DESERT AND MRS. AJAX

of black caps—the man who had shot another man dead by his own camp-fire went down into the grinning desert at high noon to pay his score.

An hour passed. At the end of that time the watchers were still on the hillside; the two Easterners in the rear, murmuring together and pointing; a hundred yards ahead, the silent, motionless woman. Beyond them all, on the point of the hill, sat a man with his eyes fixed unswervingly on the desert, the long barrel of his rifle across his knees.

The figure was quite small now. Plodding steadily away to the south, it often lost itself for several minutes at a time among the swales and gullies but always came to sight again, crawling up the opposite bank with the torpid movement of some heat-dazed insect. And always it grew more vague and more difficult to pick up again, once it had vanished, until at last it turned into a mere dot in a hazed immensity of gray.

Another hour passed and there were only two on the hillside, sitting on in the heat while the silence rang in their ears and lizards flickered up to the tops of the rocks to stare at them alertly with liquescent eyes.

After a time, the man on the point of the hill

leaned his rifle against a boulder and raised his glasses. What he saw apparently satisfied him, for he put the glasses back in his pocket and picked up his rifle again.

She rose to meet him as he came along the hillside, picking his way carefully among the brush and stones. He had not yet noticed her, and, curiously enough, he did not look very grim. The stoniness in his face had passed away—the eyes were warm and kind again—his air was that of a man suddenly relieved of an agonizing weight, or, better still, it was that of one who had joyously washed himself free of contamination. He stooped to pluck idly at some bright desert flower as he came along, and was even heard to hum a little tune. But when he saw her waiting for him beside the rock of her vigil his face grew grave again. He wondered if she would ever know how very close a thing it had been.

“I didn’t know it would be like *that*,” the girl said simply. “I never thought of there being any *ending*.” Her breath began to come quickly. Her eyes, worn out with watching, grew moist with tears. She looked up at him piteously, unconscious that her hands were clutched together at her breast. Self-accusation trembled on her lips.

236 THE DESERT AND MRS. AJAX

"It seemed enough just to *prove* it. I never stopped to think how it must end." She gave a single, convulsive sob and wavered towards him. "And all last night, while I was riding, I was so happy—*happy!*"

"*Don't*, partner," he said, in anguish, and she felt his arm around her for one blessed moment—strengthening her, lifting her up, and pouring a vitalizing current into her heart. "Please don't say those things. *You're* not to blame—or else *he's* right and we—all of us—are wrong."

"I know," she said honestly, her brimming eyes held up to his as they stood together. "And yet it was *I* who did it all."

"No," he smiled, so that it was a pleasure to be so gently contradicted. "I guess we can leave a little of it to *him*. And yet, what have we done to-day—you and I, and the fear of this gun? We've only taken this man that ought to be kicking for his life up there against the sky——"

"But the *torture!*" she cried. "It isn't *right!*"

"*Torture?*" he answered. "But he *wants* that. He's good and willing to take it. He gave up his life to-day—with that piece of paper. Now he's trying to get it back. He's ready to pay!"

THE DESERT AND MRS. AJAX 237.

"Do you mean he *won't* die?" she asked swiftly.

There was a strange mixture of feelings in the ranchman's breast as he made answer. Yet he was honest as always.

"He has a chance," he said.

CHAPTER XI

" I TELL you what, Charlotte. I've done some fairly smart things in my life, but I was just a little bit the smartest when I got hold of this man Holly."

Warder père, luxuriating in his balbriggans and déboutonné in mood as well, was cooling a sun-burned face in the wash-basin while, between splutters, he delivered himself of some opinions to his wife.

" It's just as they say out here—' Gold is where you find it.' You never can tell—you never can tell! Why, when I went down that shaft and looked at the ore I saw right away what it is that drives these fellows crazy. Just think, Charlotte! There we were, walking along in a tunnel to all appearances just like a ditch for a gas-main back in Jenkintown, when Holly put his hand out and said, ' There she is!' And there it was! FIVE HUNDRED DOLLARS A TON! Just strike it *once*—once in a lifetime, Charlotte, and your fortune's made.

" And, by George!—the wealth in that property

is something fairly amazing. Holly was as tickled as a ten-year-old boy. Just sat back and laughed and laughed, and said, 'Well, are you satisfied, Mr. Warder?' And I said, 'Holly, you piebald old son-of-a-gun——' "

"Osgood! Your *language!*"

"I know—I know, darling. It's the high altitude——"

"But I always thought it took some special kind of a person to know about gold," his wife remarked, doubtfully surveying her hero's legs. "I didn't know that an ordinary man like you could go right out and get it. Isn't it awfully hard to see in the ground?"

"Not at all—not at all," corrected the miner-husband. "Often you can see it in little yellow specks sticking right out. Why—a rock no bigger than that sofa you're sitting on will sometimes be worth a thousand dollars if it only has those little flakes in it! It's really no trick at all. It's what I've claimed all along—you simply find it—or you don't. *Anybody* can have a mine—a boy, or a woman—anybody at all. Oh, you never can tell—you never can tell."

"I wonder if Imogene——"

"What say?"

"Nothing, my dear—nothing at all," his wife murmured. "I was only wondering something."

But, however largely the question of mines might have bulked in the lady's thoughts at just that moment, there was one particular affair which Mrs. Warder at no time lost sight of, and the pressure which lay behind her immediate hints to Amy Radnor was not weakened by what she had heard from her husband. As a result, the girl began to feel very forlorn. Insults were an ancient experience for the last of the Radnor family, but what had once been borne as a necessary affliction became a torment under freer surroundings. All too late, she yearned to escape from bondage. Compared to the enterprising Belvawney, whose horizons were apparently limited only by the mail-order service, her own life seemed bounded by the conventional shapes of a boxwood hedge. Yet Amy knew instinctively that her yearnings would be in vain. Your fine-furred house-cat must own something sharper than the mere stirrings of independence if it contemplates the perilous aeries of the backyard fence.

But Amy's mind, to-day, was more particularly harassed by another matter, and she set out on

a solitary walk through the orchard, which naturally brought about a meeting with the one person she devoutly hoped to avoid.

She blushed as the ranchman drew near, and wondered how she looked to him, bareheaded, distraught, and silent. With a woman's first fear, she hoped she would not be laughed at. But the ranchman only took off his hat and leaned casually against the fence nearby. It seemed as if he understood her thoughts and had dropped into silent communion with her. Her flutterings ceased. She felt at ease again.

"Well, Miss Amy," he said with a pleasantly teasing note in his voice. "What's his name?"

Amy's second blush was a complete success, until a hand dropped down and covered her own. "It's all right, Miss Amy," she heard him say. "Nobody told me. I just naturally guessed it. I won't tell."

"I don't see how you ever imagined it," Amy stammered, through her subsiding pinkness. "Nobody at home knows it; not even Aunt Charlotte—just David and myself. But, oh! Mr. Holly!" she broke out with a rush of confidence, "I don't know *what* we are going to do. We've been engaged for so *long*—and he works and works and

can't get ahead. It seems, sometimes, as if it would *never* happen."

"Tell me about it," he said.

Amy drew a long breath.

"He's a clerk in the Third Street Bank," she said. "For a long time he was a 'runner.' Then they put him in the 'loan department' for what seemed a geological period. I was afraid he'd petrify there. But he got out of that somehow, and now he's First Assistant in the Receiving Teller's cage. But the stuffy bank people *won't* do anything for him—and old Bailey, the Teller, simply *won't* die—and there we are—there *everything* is. We're just tied hand and foot. And David's growing so white, and I'm growing so *sallow*——"

"Does your aunt know?" he interrupted quickly.

"No, indeed," was the frightened response. "*She* wants me to marry someone with lots of money—she doesn't care if I like him or not. I might *like* him, of course," and Amy launched a daring smile, "but even out here you can't love two people at once,—unless you're a Bishop."

"Of course, Uncle Os' is awfully good to me," she went on, "but whenever we get settled down

for a talk, little boys come with code messages, or else Long Distance calls up and says Pittsburg wants to talk to him, and so we never get around to poor David. But it does me just as much good to talk to you," she said naively. "You seem more like an uncle every day. That won't make you feel too old, will it? You're not really an old man."

"Oh, no," he said swiftly. "No. I'm not old, But tell me more about this man back there in a cage—who can't die."

"Oh, you can't *do* anything," Amy said hopelessly. "I've given him mental suggestion for everything from breaking his neck on the cellar stairs to being destroyed by a taxi-cab. And, just to make matters worse, David saw him 'Fletcher-izing' his lunch last week, and *now* we think he'll live twenty years!"

Holly pondered. "How much money has this David boy saved up?" he asked. "But of course you wouldn't know——"

"Oh, ho! Don't I?" exclaimed Amy. "We have exactly four hundred and seventy-two dollars and nine cents. We're waiting for a thousand."

Holly straightened up and struck the fence a sharp blow with his fist. "Tell him to buy or

option every single Bullionfield share he can get his hands on," he said. "Amarinth and Daisy Extension and Red Rock—they'll all be booming big to-morrow. Tell him to draw every cent of his money—even that nine cents will buy a share of 'Red Rock'—just tell him to take a big breath and let-her-go! But you'll have to hurry," he warned. "Wire him right away. Send it in code and get Miss Belvawney to help you. Don't let Biddle know, or he'll be too quick—perhaps he's thought of it already."

"I'll hurry," gasped the girl. "I'll go right now."

"And see here!" he exclaimed vigorously, as he strode after her. "Make a good job of it. Tell him to get you all he can of everything at any price and send me his figures. If you need any more money, *come to me!* I'll stand by you right straight through!"

"I don't like to borrow," the girl fluttered as she stumbled along through the orchard. "But, oh! if it only *does* come true! I know what I'll do. I'll give you my note!"

"But I'll want interest," he smiled. "I'm a terrible miser."

They reached the edge of the orchard and

paused. The ranch-house was not far distant—to all appearances no one was in sight. Amy turned to him with a rush of gratitude, her face transfigured. The sallowness had been reddened away and hope had lighted its fires behind her eyes.

“How can I *ever* thank you!” she exclaimed, and dropped her cheek for an instant against his coat. “If you weren’t so awfully *tall*, partner, I’d pay you some of that ‘interest’ now,” and with another vivid blush, Amy picked up her skirts and fled.

Mrs. Warder, on the ranch-house porch, gasped, rose half out of her chair, hesitated—then sat heavily down. When, a moment before, she had been idly gazing orchardwards, she had been unwilling to believe her eyes. But for the fleeting vision of her niece, very much flushed and properly abashed, the very speed of the thing would have made it incredible. Yet the fruits of her generalship were undeniably in hand. To seize the psychological moment—and to be adroit—these had been her weapons. But even Napoleon in Italy had never won such swift success.

“It must be the high altitude, as Osgood says,” she murmured, and sat back and folded her plump

246 THE DESERT AND MRS. AJAX

hands. Matters had turned out happily, after all.

Only once did a shadow cross her face. Although the thought that came to her was not precisely dismaying, yet it intruded upon her tranquillity with insistent interrogation. **WHAT WOULD THE STRONG WOMAN HAVE TO SAY ABOUT IT?**

While she was pondering this question and trying to build up rebuttals to a curious sensation of fear she suddenly heard a loud "S-S-S-S-S-T!" behind her. Turning anxiously, she saw Imogene's head protruding from the doorway.

The Strong Woman held up a warning finger and looked cautiously about.

"*Are you all ready to go up there?*" she whispered hoarsely. "Now's our time—nobody's in sight. Just go monkeying around as if you weren't going anywhere in partickeler, and I'll meet you out back of the hay-stacker. We'll have to be quick, or the men will see us going up the trail."

The other was instantly all attention.

"I won't let anybody see me," she fluttered back, and gathered herself together. "But won't we need some sacks to put the gold in?"

"I've got all that," was the response, as Imogene drew back into the darkened hallway.

"Picks, and candles, and sample bags—*everything's been fixed for you*," said Imogene.

And so it happened that Dick Holly, coming back through the fields, found the house almost deserted and only Drybone and Altamont on view, sitting on the wood-pile. The little man was evidently explaining the workings of his flute, for presently the foreman raised it gingerly to his lips and blew forth a startling, staccato toot.

Holly knew well enough whom he sought. The memory of two days ago was with him still, and it dragged a snarl of worries in its train.

Hardly had they put Bullionfield and the puzzled Sheriff at their backs than Clarice had lapsed into thoughtful silence, with trouble lying behind her eyes, as if she groped among old memories for a leading thread. Swiftly contrived though his revenge on Macklin had been, he feared that some fleeting remembrance—an inflection or a gesture, had set a train of thought in motion that would bring nothing but disastrous results.

The office-door stood open and he wandered irresolutely inside. The room seemed as if she had just left it, for he seemed to sense her in the pictures with which she had hidden the homely walls—the curtains draped back to let the sunlight in—

the pretty lamp-shades she had fashioned out of paper. Her books, he saw, were put carefully away in a box out of sight, while his own few volumes stood neatly arranged on a shelf. Elsewhere were other records of her unfailing industry, and wherever his eyes strayed they saw half-understood evidences of the girl's efforts to better herself and her surroundings. Flowers were there, as always—honeysuckle and wild roses—and some bright desert blossom she had found in the valley that morning. On her table by the window, one of her gauntlets lay, palm upwards, the curves of her fingers still in its shape.

He looked around again, and bit his lip in silent chagrin. It seemed such a strange, unreachable world for such as he—this fragment of a young girl's life—of half-guessed mysteries and refinements beside whose delicate shadings his own traits were garish and crude. He grew timid as her images multiplied. Unknowingly, he had created an atmosphere so redolent of femininity that it would have needed only a jacket thrown carelessly across a chair to make him hastily withdraw. While he stood there, pondering, the girl entered the room.

"I thought I had left a glove," she murmured.

He followed her eyes and saw the gauntlet clutched firmly in his hand. He stiffened, and handed it to her with a wordless apology. He would have liked to smile, but, somehow, was unable.

The girl lowered her eyes and fidgeted with a pencil on her desk.

"You have something for me to do?" she ventured.

"No," he said, with a hollow sound echoing somewhere in the vastness of his head. "No. Nothing that I can think of now."

He looked down at his feet, surprised not to find them cemented to the floor—they felt that way. He found he was staring at her helplessly, wondering what made her eyes so full and sweet. He wondered why her hair shone—and why it waved. A tinge of pink was creeping up in her cheek and he was puzzled for a reason. He saw her pick up a pen-knife and drop it with a clatter.

"Mr. Holly," she said, with a quick breath, "there doesn't seem to be much for me to do around here any more."

"*Ma'am?*" he said, startled.

"I said—there wasn't anything for me to *do*," she repeated bravely. "You've put us all on half-

250 THE DESERT AND MRS. AJAX

pay, out of the goodness of your heart, but I can't see at all that I'm earning it—all the mining business has gone over to the camp now, you know—I haven't done any of it here for a week or more. Of course, I'd like awfully to do anything you wish, but frankly, Mr. Holly," and she raised her eyes with a perceptible effort, "I don't see how you justify my employment."

"*Employment?*" he said, with a bewildered echo. "*Justify?* Why—why—why, I thought you were just *staying* here!"

"But the money," she said with some difficulty. "I can't take it."

"Why—I'm *giving* you that," he explained wildly. "It really isn't *pay*—don't look at it that way. It's just to help you out because I got you all in a tight place. And just *see* what you did for us at Yellow Dog!"

"I know what you mean," she said, distressed. "But even if there was a need for it once, don't you think you've done enough for us now?"

What was she about to say? He felt a presentiment that something was going to hurt him presently. The girl began to look first on one side and then on the other.

"I don't know exactly what to say," she fal-

tered. "You make it hard for me. You ask me here as your guest—and then you *pay* your guest. How do you know but that I'd like to stay here always?" She blushed furiously at this, but kept on. "Don't you see how hard that will make it after a while? When you get tired of us and want us to go, you won't just be saying good-by—you'll be 'dismissing your employees.' And some of them—the Blondellis, for instance—might not want to go, and then you'd be hurting their feelings terribly. But I ought not to speak for any but myself. I only know that it's all been like a beautiful dream till to-day. I see now that we were all so disheartened and hungry and forlorn that we just took everything you gave us, and we've lived along ever since without a thought for the future. Perhaps it didn't seem so queer until the others came—it was more as if we were all one happy family, with a fine, big brother to take care of us. It's been the very biggest help to me I ever, ever had, but now—but now I'll have to go——"

"*Don't!*" he said, anguished, for he saw the worried look behind it all. "Please don't, Miss Clarice. Give me a minute or two! Can't I—can't I sign 'em up with long-term contracts at full pay and *make* 'em stay?"

"But that would only make it worse," she said, with a faint smile over this incoherency. "Then you'd be paying us *twice* as much for doing nothing."

The worried look clouded her eyes again—it seemed as if she couldn't keep it back. In spite of her self-control, her mind had been whirling night and day in a tireless circle around that pivotal scene in Bullionfield. Unreasonable though it was, her eyes were always following a black dot plodding wearily across a yellow plain. As often as her thoughts flashed back to the sudden drama in the office at the mine it was with an insistent searching for something connected with the man Macklin which had passed through her mind, half noticed, at the time, but which now was developing into a frightful suspicion. And yet, try as she might, she could not remember what she had seen or heard.

She stole a look at his face. His eyes were full of misery.

"Am I a fool?" he was asking in a curiously broken voice. "Why—I thought we were *happy* here! What is it that I can do? Isn't there some way——"

"No," she said sadly. "Don't you see that

it's all over—for me, at least? I came as a guest—and I've tried to help—and now I'll go as a guest." The girl's voice faded away. She looked to one side again. Her throat worked and she picked at her dress.

"But, *Clarice!*" the man cried frantically, "I DON'T WANT YOU TO GO! You *mustn't* go! You *can't!* You just got to stay here and help me out. Why—I can't have you running off like this into the world where I can't find you!" His arms twitched at his sides. Almost—almost they were going out to her.

"You want me to *stay?*" she asked tremulously.

"Yes! Yes!" he cried, with the inspiration of despair. "I've got the biggest kind of a scheme for you to work on. It's—it's about this ranch—something I've been thinking of, oh! for ever so long—something that you're just fitted for. Why," he said, with wild gestures, "you haven't any idea at all what I'm going to do here when I really get going—I haven't got it all worked out, myself, yet. You see—it's been my plan to take this nice, big, healthy ranch here——" He was playing for time now, and racking his brains. "Where we have sunlight—and water—and—and everything and——"

254 THE DESERT AND MRS. 'AJAX

—She was looking at him very directly—

“And turn it into a—a HOME! A home for boys—*little* boys. Yes, that's it. Little boys that have got consumption. There it is! Now you've got it!”

Her eyes opened. She took a quick breath. He saw his chance and rushed on.

“That's what I want you for. Take this 'Home' and run it! Be boss. Make the kids get out and chase up and down the hills! Order the fool doctors around and show 'em who's who, by Jinks! See that they all get fed.” He came up for air, searched her face hopefully, then plunged in again. “Wouldn't you like to do that? Won't that be work enough for you? You'd have your hands full. Come on, Miss Clarice. Be a sport. Say you'll stay. I'll put Imogene and everyone to work on it—*nobody* will have to go. But no charity *this* time.” (He was going to be very careful of this. No mistakes like that again for Dick Holly.) “Just cold, hard *business*. And it will be up to you to see that it's managed right. Those who don't do their work will have to come to you and get their time.”

The girl put out her hand and felt for the table. She didn't know whether to laugh or cry or turn

and run away. Although she half suspected charity again in some insidious form a recollection of their first day together in this same room came to her, and with it her intuition of his loneliness. It was just that, after all—just loneliness. And he was wanting her to stay and help and remodel and work out this amazing fantasy for helping little boys——

“ I’ll be holding you responsible——” She heard his warning faintly, as if he spoke from a long way off. And then, somehow, the sickness seemed to pass away. There was a new tone in his voice for her—something that suddenly opened up another world in which neither antecedents, nor anxieties, nor fripperies, nor futile longings held any place.

She came slowly out of her trance and looked up at him. If it were not Love that was shining on her out of his eyes, then she had made a misreading from which she could never recover.

“ I KNEW YOU WOULD! ” he shouted excitedly, before she could open her lips. “ Good-by. God bless you, Clarice. I’ll—I’ll—I’ll see you at breakfast, to-morrow! ”

And he was suddenly gone—rushing out of the door.

CHAPTER XII

ANOTHER day was breaking, although it was yet a little while to dawn when she awoke.

When it came at last, leaping with bright fingers from point to point, she ceased her wide-eyed musing and stirred exquisitely, easing the languor from her limbs. With the thick rope of her hair tumbling across a snow-white shoulder, the girl raised herself on a rounded arm among her coverings and sat looking out across the desert.

The plain was still asleep. Lifeless, cool, and gray, it seemed a great, silent sea through whose unmoving surface the foothills shouldered up like drowsy amphibians resting, half submerged, along the shore. A tinge of color began to glow on the western peaks. Gliding down into blue abysses beyond, it brought range after range up into the light and picked them out with twinkling facets. Marching in serried rank they strode forward out of their obscurity—mountain-tops and crested buttes, gaudily flaming cliffs and yellow bluffs of sand—while unguessed valleys opened out between

under gray pools of mist until measurement became futility.

She threw out her arms to it all, with a thirsty intake of her breath. How big and beautiful the world was to-day—and how bright! “Hurry! Hurry! We must hurry!” her heart was singing. “We must not lose a moment of this glorious life! So much to do! So much to feel! Hasten! HASTEN, I say!”

She slipped from her bed and dressed swiftly, plunging her face and arms into the cold water with a joyful shudder at the shock. She smiled without reason at her bright image as she knotted her hair, and raised her beautifully molded arms above her head with a delicious stretch and a thrill. Never before had she been so vigorous—so all alive. She felt hungry for action—for something to which she could apply this suddenly abounding vitality. A mocking-bird, perched high in a shimmering cottonwood at her window, called to her with a rippling fall of notes, and she stole down the stairs and out of the silent house.

The world was all astir again, and with little runs she sped eagerly across the grass, listening for the sweet fall of water in the brooks, watching with glistening eyes the black-and-white magpies

flirting their long tails on the fence-posts. The orchard glinted with ripening fruit, and she brought an apple to Polly, nosing through her bars. Clarice put a hand to the mare's neck as the cool nose muzzled in her palm. The animal's coat was smooth and shining. Someone had risen even earlier than she, herself.

The girl turned away with a faint smile hovering around her lips. Things had changed since yesterday. While she dared not name the happiness that warmed her through and through, yet the song her heart was singing had but one refrain. Love and Life were drawing nearer for Clarice. She felt herself poised on the shore of a fragrant, sunlit sea, quivering with readiness to plunge in and swim to the other side.

A curl of smoke wisped up from the kitchen and a martial step accompanied by an abnormal clattering of pans announced that Imogene was up and stirring. As the girl re-entered the house she paused for a moment, then sped lightly up to her room. When she joined the Strong Woman pottering over breakfast at the stove she held a newspaper covered parcel hidden behind her back.

"Hello, Bright Eyes!" cried Imogene in grand good humor. "Up with all the little birdies this

morning, aren't you, Sweet? How's star-gazing these nights, Lovey Dove? Did it seem like the same old moon?"

"I wasn't——"

"Oh, you can't fib to me, Vere de Vere. I saw you rubbering out of your window. It was long after midnight before *you* hit the feathers, young lady!"

"Why—where were you at that hour?" stammered Clarice.

"Ah-hah! Where wasn't I?" the other responded deviously, backing the girl into a corner and imprisoning the blushing face between her hands. "See here, Miss Peaches-and-Cream. Don't waste your time worrying about old Imogene these days—or nights, either. You haven't got a great big mining operation to bother you most to death like *she* has. What's that you're hiding there so cute behind your back? Gimme it instantly!"

"Go *away!*" laughed the girl, and struggled free; "don't you dare touch that bundle! Have you got a good, hot fire, Boggsey Dear?"

"Perfectly bully! Want an egg to go on till breakfast? You can have anything your little heart desires." Imogene was in uncommon spirits

260 THE DESERT AND MRS. AJAX

this morning, although there were certain blisters on her hands which, Clarice was sure, had not been there the day before.

The girl lifted the stove-lid and thrust her bundle in among the coals; then stood guard over it as it burned.

"You'll scorch all your back breadth, Honey," Imogene observed, as she sliced her potatoes. "Going riding to-day, are you—you and the Biddle boy?"

"Yes."

"I'd like to ride, too," sighed the Cook Lady. "I wisht I was young and real *strong* again. I lose my temper so quick nowadays with all this high-art cooking in the food that I bet I'd just about *kill* one of those little horses if he didn't go right. And, by the way, speaking of athletics"—and she seized upon the other with an accusing eye—"I haven't heard you doing your exercises at bedtime lately, Clarice."

"No, ma'am," answered Clarice meekly, as the fire began a gentle roar behind her.

"People in our line of business have gotta keep in shape, you know," the Strong Woman reminded. "You're not exactly what I'd call 'flat-chested,' yet—but *don't* you get too darn *refined*. This

mail-order business can be carried entirely too far sometimes."

The girl moved a little farther away from the reddening stove and smiled.

"What in the world's come over young Amy I *don't* know," and Imogene clutched a loaf of bread in her hand and strode around the kitchen hunting anxiously for something with which to cut it. She found it on the doorstep, where the Wild Man had been making beautiful kindlings. "Now, isn't that just like an Indian? Another day's nicking and it would be a Christy cake-knife! Oh, yes—about Amy. Well. I've been figuring all along that maybe Amy and that Biddle boy—What? No? You don't mean it!"

"No," said Clarice loudly, for the fire was streaming very audibly up the chimney.

"Well, I'll be darned," and Imogene sliced viciously for a moment. "I hope it isn't Mr. Holly she's so bubbling about."

"No."

The fire gave out a final roar and died down.

Clarice threw back her head and laughed—recklessly—exultantly—a full-hearted, joyous ripple of happiness that sang and echoed through the

262 THE DESERT AND MRS. AJAX

kitchen like the song of the mocking-bird perched outside in the cottonwood tree.

It was all over at last. Off with the old life! On with the new! The last relic of the past had dwindled into nothingness, whisking away in a cloud of blue smoke up Imogene's chimney.

The Strong Woman shot a suddenly suspicious look at the girl and cocked her ear.

"CLEAR OUT!" she cried, advancing with the toasting-fork brandished on high. "There's something funny going on here behind all these meek little 'yesses' and 'noses,'" and lifting the stove-lid she peered curiously within. Shapeless though the residuum was, enough of its general outlines was left to confirm the Strong Woman's dreadful suspicions. Of that which, glittering and spangled, Imogene had been wont to watch gyrating perilously overhead in the long ago, naught now remained but a handful of fluffy incandescent ashes.

The Strong Woman whirled about with a frightened gasp and clutched the girl's wrist with a tragic hand.

"CLARICE!" she shrieked; "YOU'VE BURNED 'EM. YOU'VE GONE AND BURNED UP YOUR TIGHTS!"

The girl stood up straight and strong.

"Yes," she said proudly. "*That's* done—and *I'm* done! Never again for me! There goes my good-by to that side of life forever! It's been a long time coming—but it's here now! And, oh! Imogene. I'm glad—I'm *glad*—I'm GLAD!"

The Strong Woman let the hand fall and drew back a pace. She looked both heartbroken and perplexed, for it seemed like sacrilege to destroy so ruthlessly what little remained of the old associations. Perhaps, to tell the truth, the time had never been when Imogene was entirely persuaded that they would not all be back under canvas together some day. Although such a course would have been opposed to her saner judgment, yet the habits of a lifetime were not easily disposed of.

"But aren't you ever going on with your act again?" she quavered, on the point of tears.

The girl did her best to smile. She knew that the older woman was only voicing a protest against such swift disruption of the old ties, for the tones carried an unconscious welling up of affection for the better parts of what once had been. But there were to be no faint-hearted yearnings now—it would all have to go—the good with the bad.

She knew she could never ask for them again—

264 THE DESERT AND MRS. AJAX

the thump of the canvas under the wind—the smell of new-turned earth—the flare of the torches at night—the pale sea of faces rocking far below. Most of it, like the most of other things, had been good. While the time for regrets had passed, yet the fact remained that the comradeship, which had been the best of it all, the care-free jauntings over the land through the bright, summer weather, the life of the Open Road would be no more.

The girl shook her head mutely, her eyes cast down.

“I didn’t know,” said Imogene with a sorrowful hiccough as she turned to her work once more. “I get real low in my mind sometimes—thinking about things. I know you’re right and I know I was right when I told you long ago to quit, but still—it’s hard to break away. Thank heavens, I didn’t bring my five-hundred-pound dumb-bells along where Mrs. Muggoosulum could see ’em. I don’t know just how I *would* get rid of *them*.”

“But however did you get put up to this so all at once?” Imogene continued, with a suddenly awakening eye. “It ain’t like you to be so terrible dramatic, Clarice.” Symbolism in even a diluted

form found a disgusted translator in Imogene. Once the Strong Woman's common sense had begun to reject the sentimental side of the proceeding she hunted industriously for a motive.

Clarice's answer was composed of an indistinct murmur, a fidget, and an alarming blush.

"Humph!" remarked the discerning Strong Woman. "There seems to be a terrible lot of moony-wooning going on round here. I guess you and that young Amy are a pair."

It was about this time that the genial odors of Imogene's cooking began to penetrate other parts of the house, and Biddle, in puttees and riding-clothes, soon made his appearance, frankly glad that Miss Belvawney had not forgotten to make ready for their ride, a fact which he promptly made known to her with a jocular boldness which had always served well in such cases, while his eye roamed over her and said other things. There was little of it that he missed—the fine surface of her throat above the rolling collar of her blouse—the lights in her hair, bound with a bright fillet of ribbon—the curves of lip and chin. In her eyes he saw a wider horizon—an indefinable addition to what had been there yesterday. Something had occurred to vitalize her face with a brighter

268 THE DESERT AND MRS. AJAX

Strong Woman, luring him in with the frying-pan.

"It's nice in here."

The Wild Man came in.

"Sit down," the voice went on in the same dulcet tones.

The Wild man *sat* down.

"Now, what was it you were thinking of saying about my little mine?" purred Imogene.

"YASS!" said the Wild Man promptly, with a gulp of alarm as he discerned not only the frying-pan but also the butcher-knife glittering in the near distance. "YASS! Imogene. *I* think you've got a *good* mine. Yass! Don't let anybody tole you different."

"Well!" said the relieved Imogene. "That's a great deal better. If there's one thing I can't abide it's people making up opinions out of their brains when they haven't rightly got *either*. WHY!" she exclaimed, with a world of disgust in her tones; "'twas me that taught you and that no-good Piute Johnny all you ever knew about mines." She centered his wavering eyes with a meaning glance. "I guess you're troubled the same like I was with them mean little porphyritic amygdaloids sorenstifying the scorified zone

and mussing up my nice diabase, ain't you, Wild Man?"

"YASS! Amig—amig—well—that's *what!*" replied the Wild Man hurriedly. "Why, yass, Imogene. That's *just* what I was toleing Johnny."

"It's breakfast time now," Imogene interrupted, "so get out your white apron and play on your triangle. And don't try to serve any of those cute little amygdaloids for breakfast-food—'cause they *won't go!*"

The two on horseback rode down the draw together towards the desert. Biddle, following the crimson scarf fluttering ahead, saw the girl riding like the wind, sitting well down in the saddle and swinging freely above the waist with the effortless carriage of a cowpuncher, but presently she reined in with a laugh that rang pure ecstasy and let the plunging Skylark and his rider rack into a walk beside her. Piqued at being outdistanced, the man watched keenly for the ancient feminine query in her eyes, for when a woman does something as well as a man, the sweetest praise is masculine. But he heard no more than the sweet simmering away of her pleasure, and when he looked

into her face he saw that she asked for nothing *he* could give.

Yet Biddle was far from being discouraged in his quest for a flirtation. Although a two weeks' investigation of this particularly rebellious case had revealed nothing more than a disconcerting sense of remoteness, he was not entirely baffled. There were a multitude of paths yet to be trod.

In the meantime, however, he had been getting in deeper than he had bargained for. Vouchsafed a last glimmer of light before the lethal waters of infatuation closed over his head, there was some discomfort in the thought that his interest could be absorbed by anyone having so strange a point of view. Principally, he was troubled by her refusal to see that he must, necessarily, represent more of that which was desirable to a woman than any man she must have known.

The Philadelphian had been conscious of this lack of appreciation all along, and it had seemed a radical defect. He felt an almost childish anger because she would not show more interest in those important things that made up his life in the East. Women, he knew, thought first of advantageous position in life, and next, of things to put on their backs. There was not one, in the dubious section

of his acquaintance, at least, whose eyes he could not brighten by ringing the changes on those two notes, and so, although it made him feel very cheap, he soon descended to a trial of her covetousness.

But Clarice wouldn't enthuse. It was not that she wasn't diverted by his personally conducted tours into the sacred limits of his clubs and the homes of his friends, but merely that she was not at all interested in him, the man, Biddle Warder, of Walnut Street and Rittenhouse Square—which was what he wanted.

Biddle was sorely puzzled but mastered his pique as best he could and broke into something amusing. The day was yet young.

Clarice gave him one of her clear-eyed, joyous looks. "I'm always so happy out here in this vastness. If I hadn't a sense of humor I'd like to *sing!*"

"Pray, don't let my probable amusement restrain you," he bantered.

"Not I," she laughed. "I'm only afraid of the mountains. I wouldn't mind you in the least."

"I'm quite aware of that," he retorted, with seeming injury, and looked away. The silence be-

272 THE DESERT AND MRS. AJAX

ing prolonged unduly, he looked back, and found her thoughtlessly whirling her quirt and humming to herself. The trick had not availed.

"Oh, yes. The desert's very fine," he hastened to say, "but don't you like the cities, too? *You'd* suit the city perfectly—you're not really made for *this*."

"But I've seen the cities—all of them," the girl replied.

"Not in the best way," he stated, despatching a barbed arrow. "The best things have all been closed to you. You've virtually seen nothing at all."

"That's why I like the West," she smiled, unoffended. "There isn't so much closed to me out here."

Biddle repressed his pity. "I'm afraid there's a great deal closed to you," he said.

The girl thought for a moment. "I suppose you mean things to do and see," she remarked. "But I always see everything. I know lots of nice men."

Biddle looked doubtful. "What kind of men—and where?"

"Oh, ai-vry-where," she drawled absently. "I know some in nearly every State."

"But they couldn't have been——"

"What?"

"I was wondering who they could have been," said Biddle, catching himself.

"Rich Man, Poor Man, Beggar Man, Thief," chanted the girl with amused reminiscence. "But I never could see much difference in them as far as their businesses went," she stated honestly. "About the best of the lot were a revolutionist and a milkman—and I believe I liked the milkman best."

Biddle stared. "Tell me about the revolutionist," he said hurriedly.

"Oh, he was nice, too, and there wasn't a place in the world where he hadn't been. He's doing very nicely now in San Francisco, he writes me,—starting up little revolutions down in South America and selling them bombs and gold lace.

"And then there was the poor old actor in Chicago—Charley Belnorde—whose wife died and left him with little twin babies. I took care of them all the time I worked at the White City. Charley hadn't any money—no one *ever* had," laughed Clarice. "So when I went away he gave me a play he'd been working on for nearly ten years. I guess it wasn't a very good play, but dear

274 THE DESERT AND MRS. AJAX

old Charley didn't know it, so his giving it to me meant a good deal.

"And after that I went out under canvas again, and the Lion Tamer, who was a Russian, taught me all about his animals. Don't you think they're very interesting? I do. Why!" she exclaimed, with lovely-eyed naïveté; "almost everything I can do with lions and tigers I learned from him! And then, one day, they hurt him, and I found a young German doctor in the crowd for him, and the doctor and I got to be great friends. After that the doctor went along with us for two weeks or more. He said it was his vacation, but I didn't know doctors could take vacations. And because he was fixing up poor old Glassinsky, who wouldn't leave the show, they gave him a seat next to me, and he would explain all about his surgical cases to me at the table. He made it perfectly absorbing.

"But there were lots more," said Clarice. "And some of them went away suddenly, like the doctor, and some of them wrote for a while—it's funny how a big, strong man can write the silliest letters—and I'm afraid that *some* of them died, but they were all *very* nice men and awfully good to me. And they were always very poor."

The girl paused and dropped into silent reverie.

"What a funny, funny life for a girl to lead," she said after a time. "If I'd had a father or a mother or anything, I suppose they would have made me understand that it was all wrong, but, somehow, it never seemed so—I guess because I could always take care of myself. The best part of it all is that I've come into all these people's lives and stayed a while and, even though I had to move on again, I know it helped me."

"So I suppose," Biddle nodded, absorbed in the play of feeling and recollection in her face. He was fast forgetting his dissatisfaction, for the fascination was gripping him more tightly every minute.

"Did you bring a canteen?" she asked, with a sudden turn of the conversation. "It's growing hot."

"I never thought of it," Biddle confessed. "Perhaps we'd better look for the Hidden Spring that the Blondellis spoke about. Aren't those the 'White Sands' over there towards the west?"

"Yes, I can see them glittering. It's all of five miles, I guess. We'll be late for dinner unless we find the spring right away."

"We'll find it," Biddle stated confidently. "I make it a point to get what I want."

276 THE DESERT AND MRS. AJAX

As they came nearer to the long belt of white sand the vegetation grew sparser and finally ceased, and when they had climbed a ridge they found themselves on the edge of what looked like a petrified sea. Enormous gullies and swales cut through the expanse of white sand in every direction, their tops curling over like waves about to break and giving off a spray of sand under the touch of the wind.

After an hour's fruitless riding and searching had brought them to the other shore, Biddle began to grow impatient. "I'll tell you what we'll do," he said roughly. "We'll just turn right around and go back again. I came out to find this spring and I'm going to do it. Those acrobatic 'Micks' can't get ahead of *me*."

"Do you think I'm too peevish?" he laughed, with a dangerous inflection, and rode Skylark closer to Polly.

"If I thought of you at all," she parried, trying out a touch of the new delightful insolence she had learned.

With this remark Biddle's bad side came up like a flash.

"Of course, I know *you* never think of men or love," he said. "But I'm less fortunate. I

find myself thinking of a certain girl *all* the time."

"Haven't you been warned?" she laughed. "Keep your eyes off Cobrita. Harry was a prize-fighter, once."

"Oh, bother Cobrita," he fumed.

"How stupid of me," she interrupted. "I forgot that first cousins could marry——"

"Wrong again," he smiled fatuously. "It seems to me it's very hard when one needs advice about these things to be met with mocking indifference—I was counting on you to help. Tell me what you think about this case. Here is a man, for instance——"

"A man?" She stood up in her stirrups. "Where is the man?"

"Right here," he snapped, off his guard.

"Oh, yes. In this case you are a man—I mean, the man. And then?"

"I am very much in love," he said doggedly, and, for a wonder, believed it.

"He is very much in love," she murmured and laughed at a lizard, flickering away underfoot.

"With——"

"With Imogene," she broke in provokingly.

"But *what* will you do with Altamont?" It was time for him to stop now. If he wouldn't—well—there was always Polly. She touched the pony with her foot and dashed ahead. Taken by surprise, Biddle kicked Skylark in the ribs and rushed after her. Here and there in delirious zig-zags the two raced along through the White Sands until the horses began to pant under the hot work, and the girl drew rein. Turning a flushed face, she laughed out what was to be the last touch of the fun which good sense forbade her.

And so he found himself temptingly close, and looking down into the dark eyes of the girl who had piqued and puzzled him for the best part of a month. There was not a single blemish on the lovely, laughing face. The swiftly coursing blood had stained her smooth cheek to the tint of a fresh, wild rose. The perfect bow of her mouth was like some ripe, tantalizing fruit. Her head, back-tilted, could not have been better poised to lure him on. Only her eyes baffled him still, half in love as he was, half furious with her unyielding reserve, and as he leaned closer out of his saddle, it came over him suddenly that she was not laughing *with* him but *at* him. All that there was for Biddle Warder in that beautiful, provoking face

was a strong woman's mockery of man's foolishness.

Under this last taunt the viciousness of the young man's nature brooked little delay in fulfilling its inclinations. Without warning and before she could start back or escape, an arm was flung about her. She felt herself caught up against him, with his maddened face pressed against hers, his lips forcing brutal kisses on her mouth and eyes and cheek.

An awful terror seized her, who had never been afraid of anything before. Lifted roughly up from her stirrups, she hung suffocated and helpless in his arms until, with the moment's passing, she felt the saddle and stirrups again. Then, half blind with rage and terribly frightened by that one instant of helplessness, the girl twisted about and struck out with all her force.

Although only that very day the Strong Woman had reminded her of the necessary daily stint, there was never a time when the girl's muscles responded so fully. Not even the most heart-clutching parabola through space from the bar of her trapeze had ever called forth half the strength that lay behind this blow. She struck with the desperation of one struggling in the throes of

nightmare and doubly strengthened by the strangeness of fright. Then, with never a backward look at the crumpled figure whirling in sick abandonment from the saddle, she threw out her arms and drew in her heels with the impelling force that every wise little cow-pony knows, and was off in a mad gallop.

It was quiet over there—among the White Sands. A noonday sun poured its flood-tide across the waste and stilled what life there was until it seemed as sterile as a scar. For all there was of sound it might have been a pool where the silences of the universe lay concentrated. Only there came the gentle purr of the wind across the ridges and the faint hiss of the sand streaming down a slope. Under the scarps of the jutting reefs, the shadows lay in grotesque, inky sprawls on a snow-white bed that gleamed and glittered. And over all Heat laid a palsying, leaden hand.

Through the heart of the white silence a pony was coming, ambling through the maze of swales and stoically climbing the ridges to plunge, stiff-legged down the other side. Beyond the creaking of the saddle leathers, the only sound in the death-like stillness was that of a girl crying to herself.

With brimming eyes set straight before her, she was weeping out her grief freely and unashamed. In the midst of her childlike happiness—when at last she seemed nearing attainment of a few of her poor little hopes of self-improvement—the Beast had been thrust upon her, leering and insensate. She gave a long, shuddering cry and shook her head blindly, sick with suspicion of what evil thoughts in the past must have been leading up to this dénouement.

Suddenly Polly pricked up her ears and turned her head. The girl also turned and looked back with a set face. A riderless horse was galloping after them, its head held up with the exulting air of the runaway.

The girl swung Polly around and began a slow approach. Whereupon the suspicious Skylark lowered his head and sidled away with a crab-like motion calculated to deceive. When capture seemed almost certain he threw up his head with a snort and broke away through the brush.

Clarice drew rein and debated. A moment more, and she had decided, and for a second time that day Polly's head was pointed in the direction of the White Sands.

Noon passed and early afternoon came and

282 THE DESERT AND MRS. AJAX

went. Mid-afternoon, with the sun-dried air still and choking, found her pale but nevertheless unswerving in her search. A pall of dust hung round her and caked in a glistening white coat on the pony's skin. Her tongue was thick like flannel between her lips. Time and again she was forced to stop and cover her eyes while they recovered from the blinding glare. Here and there she found footprints, but wherever she followed she always found the bootmarks returning. To make matters worse, the swiftly caving sand and the tireless wind were fast obliterating the trail. Looking about her with tired, smarting eyes she finally caught a glimpse of a dark edge of green above some hummocks not far away. If that were the Hidden Spring, her own condition as well as Polly's demanded that something be done at once, so she wearily turned the pony's head. A few minutes' heavy plodding and she had gained the course which led directly to the clump of mesquite. Something was lying huddled up on the ground beside the spring and as she came nearer she saw that her search was ended. She had found him.

"I've had a hard time," Biddle said, staring at her stupidly. "The darn sun, you know—and

those foots—feets—footprints—I followed and I followed and it wasn't any use——” His utterances faded away in a senseless clucking.

Something clutched at the girl's heart and she dropped on her knees beside him. “Never mind now, Mr. Warder,” she said hurriedly. “Don't talk about it any more,” and she helped him bathe his face. “I've come to take you home. We'll get out of here right away.”

“You can't,” said Biddle with thick certainty. “Nobody can. I've tried and tried and it can't be done. If it wasn't for this water I'd be dead.” He sank down again.

The trapeze-woman put out her hand for Polly's rein.

“Come,” she said decisively. “Rouse yourself. Get up here on this horse.” Seeing that she had waked him, she grasped him by the shoulder and shook him forcibly. “Get up!” she cried. “Get up at once and do as I tell you!”

A look of fright passed over the man's face. Obeying her with more or less uncertain wobblings he managed to get on his feet.

“Where's old Skylark?” he asked, and she felt his weight fall back on her as she was helping him mount. “This is *your* horse. This is Polly.”

284 THE DESERT AND MRS. AJAX

"Skylark's not far away. Oh, *do* get up, Mr. Warder," she urged, and nearly frantic with this strange foe which seemed almost like drunkenness, she put forth her abundant strength and lifted the man into the saddle.

"By George!" he breathed admiringly, as he clutched at the pommel. "You're all right, Miss—er—Miss—why! I can't think of your name! I weigh a hundred and sixty, and you lifted me just like a baby. I sort of *feel* like a baby, too," he murmured. "I wonder what's the matter!"

It was a curious-looking party that finally emerged from the White Sands onto the harder floor of the desert. The man was swaying, bent over in the saddle; the woman was well-nigh exhausted from the heavy walking. She had lost her color and her cheeks were lined with the strain. The dry, lifeless air choked her and slapped her across the face like a stuffy blanket. In spite of the drink she had had at the Spring she felt consumed with thirst. She stopped and leaned dizzily against the mare's neck. It was going to be hard work to reach the ranch.

Suddenly Biddle came out of his lethargy. After a bewildered look at the white-faced woman he slid down from the pony.

"I guess I'm all right now," he said thickly.
"It's your turn to ride."

She made painful negation with her swimming head, while she bit her lips to keep from fainting. Yet she saw he was looking at her with only a plea for her own welfare in his eyes. She saw he was remembering some of it now, and that he was speaking to her out of the Pit of Shame.

"I wish you would get on this horse, Miss Belvawney. I can see now a little bit of what you've really done for me to-day.—God knows I'd feel better if I'd realized it sooner. I know perfectly well I can't *make* you get on," he added forlornly.
"Somehow, the man of the party doesn't seem to be much of a man to-day—but I'll tell you nevertheless, that I mean to walk the rest of the way if it kills me—and that you had better ride."

Too tired even to speak, she was still obstinately shaking her head when she saw Polly turn and look across the desert.

"She must be looking at Skylark," the girl whispered, and with this new hope to steady them the two walked on and found that the pony's instinct was unerring. Skylark, much subdued, was waiting for them on the shady side of a deep wash,

286 THE DESERT AND MRS. AJAX

under a ledge of rock. The episode, and its aftermath, were nearly over.

Drawing near to the ranch in the early evening, Biddle looked behind them and broke the long silence.

"There's a pillar of dust back there where we were," he said. "I wonder who it can be?"

The woman turned her head away, the better to disguise a warm rush of life that flooded her tired body. Never a doubt existed in her mind as to who was down there on the plain and who, having seen them headed safely homewards, was unobtrusively coming in their wake. Her eyes lighted up with a replica of the morning's shinings. The day was going to end, after all, as it had begun—in happiness.

"I wonder," said Clarice, and smiled.

CHAPTER XIII

IN speaking of the next twelve hours it is our apt vernacular which best describes Biddle's mingled feelings, and it may be truthfully said that Biddle had a "hard night." Not even the cold bottle of beer consumed in desperation at midnight out of a tumbled bed was successful in inducing sleep, and the young man lay on his back for hours staring up into the darkness with burning eyes, while the long arm of a cottonwood, whispering in the night wind, tapped against his casement and a tree-toad croaked a cool though lonely note. As soon as his recollections began to crystallize, it was borne in on him that he had not been thrown from his horse at all. Neither had he been artfully kicked by a departing hoof nor stunned by striking his head on the ground. Instead, he had been "put down for the count"—"knocked out cold"—by a woman.

Biddle's shame was of the teeth-grinding variety. To add to the pleasure of the night watches, that obnoxious imp who sometimes sits on our foot-board and gleefully repeats the day's idiocies,

hunted the boy out and tortured him without mercy. Nothing was omitted, nothing minimized, nothing forgotten. The shameful facts were spelled before his wide eyes in flaming letters, and his punishment branded on him with a hissing iron. After a while he got up and wandered disconsolately down the hall to the shower-bath. The cold douche served to turn the current of his thoughts and he began to marvel at what the girl had done. It also occurred to him that she was undoubtedly much more powerful physically than himself, and, curiously, he began to extract some satisfaction from the fact. After that it was all over for Biddle. When he went back to bed it was with the conviction that the very best thing he could do was to ask the impossibly named Miss Vere de Vere Belvawney, who had once been a circus acrobat, to marry him as soon as she conveniently could.

In the meantime several other minds were similarly disturbed, and next morning's sun rose on a feverish household, the aching half-hour before breakfast finding Mrs. Warder innocently cornered by Altamont.

At the moment of their meeting the little man was moving rapidly along a path beside the house,

immersed in the result of some of Mike's researches, his nimble gait embellished by a little skip that interpolated itself with all the independence of a hiccough. Altamont's eyes were fixed on an unseen point in the ether and his hair was rampantly unsubdued. At times, he stopped to pull at a refractory garter which, in turn, caught up his trousers under its strap and held them there high above his shoe-tops. Rising from one of these bendings he collided violently with Mrs. Warder.

"Your pardon, Madam," the little man said, with a recognizable degree of manner. "I had no wish to obstruct your path in this awkward fashion."

"Eh?" said the lady.

"I say, I'm sorry I jiggled off your glasses," he explained. "I was thinking very hard. I've been thinking about it all night. It is a question very full of meat."

"What is?" asked Mrs. Warder not unkindly.

"PIGS!" said Altamont, with calm certainty.

"Why, yes," said she, startled into thought.

"So they are. *Very* full."

He looked at her with the quick, sidewise flirt of a bird, while his eyes brightened at the pros-

pect of an appreciative listener. He hesitated, then offered his crooked arm with a timid though respectful query in his eye.

The lady accepted gladly. That is to say: she had heard that it was unwise to refuse. You must always do what they wished until you could escape. They walked along the path.

"The producing power of the pig is perfectly preposterous," said Altamont, with a gentle wave of his hand. "In making a perfect pen picture of porcine proclivities——"

"*In or with* a pen?" asked Mrs. Warder, with a brilliant but artificial smile.

"I should prefer being *without* the pen," was the baffling answer. "But, as I was saying, it is possible to prophesy without postulatory pardons by reason of their peculiar posteritousness——"

"Eh?" said the lady again.

"I am speaking of their particularly powerful pork providing propensities," Altamont answered gravely. "When properly provided with peas——"

"But I think you have," objected the lady with a careful laugh. "Haven't you? I mean—aren't you?"

"Are I? I *should* say—have I? What?"

Altamont could not help thinking the conversation somewhat involved.

"P's, of course," said Mrs. Warder, with some distinctness. "*Lots* of them. I *never* heard so many."

"HEARD THEM?" quavered the little man with a frightened look. "Why—they're perfectly noiseless, I think."

Mrs. Warder wondered nervously if Altamont's trouble was contagious.

"Do you mean 'p's' or 'peas'?" she asked.

"I mean 'peas,'" he answered, with a puzzled frown. "That is—I *think* I do—don't I?"

"But how are *your* 'peas' spelt? Of course, you know *that* much," she asked, seeing that she must straighten him out at once.

"Why, with a 'p,'" was the troubled reply. "How *would* you spell 'pea'? It's just the ordinary, round kind, that's in 'pods.'" Altamont was growing a trifle mixed himself.

"The very same 'p'—round or with a tail to it," Mrs. Warder said, with all the necessary firmness. "It doesn't look a *bit* different, no matter what it's in—unless it's a German 'p.'" She dropped his arm and prepared for flight.

"Ah—I catch your meaning at last. You allude

to the quality or nature of the pea," he said brightly, with a detaining finger on her arm. "Really, Madam, I assure you. *It's all one to a pig!*"

"And to me," said the lady wittily, and seeing Amy in the near distance, she scuttled away. "For Heaven's sake, protect me," she whispered. "The man can talk of absolutely nothing this morning except things that begin with 'p.' But you ought to have seen him bow. He couldn't have done it better if he'd been very well-bred."

"Bread?" asked the pursuing Altamont, seeming to catch only the last word. "I could spell 'bread' with a 'p,' too—if I could only get in the right place."

"Where could that be?" Mrs. Warder asked with a significant look at Amy.

"In France," chuckled Altamont, and having fully demonstrated the low cunning of the insane, he walked quickly away.

"I've been expecting that you'd have something to tell me," Amy heard her relative saying pettishly. "Don't you feel as if it were nearly time you told me?"

Amy drew back. So the hunt was on again!

With a feeling that what she was about to say was, at least, essentially true, Amy made candid reply.

"I don't feel as if I wanted to say anything just *yet*," she responded, with eyes averted. "I am waiting—waiting for a *message*," said Amy impressively. "Do you think I ought to say more than that just *now*, Aunt Charlotte?"

"Per—*haps* not," was the puzzled reply. "And yet—when we're all here together——"

Holly, coming in to breakfast at this moment, received a lightning telepathic warning from Amy and hurried by, much to Mrs. Warder's amazement.

"It's all very curious, it seems to me," that lady murmured. "Why—he actually seemed to avoid you!" and with her voice fading away as her perplexity increased, Mrs. Warder proceeded instinctively in the direction of the dining-room.

But the Philadelphian was not the only one this morning who was worried, for the freezing note in Mrs. Warder's voice was promptly noted by the ranchman. To make matters worse, breakfast itself was unaccountably delayed, the Strong Woman appearing distrait and silent.

"I must get them together," the ranchman thought. "We can't let things get tightened up

294 THE DESERT AND MRS. AJAX

this way." And so pondering the matter of his guests' amusements in a disturbed mind he worked himself into a partially frenzied state from whence emerged—an idea! But the brilliant solution could not yet be disclosed, and an hour after breakfast found him still trying it out before submitting it to her who was to be its judge.

That person had taken it upon herself to gather cooking apples in the orchard for Imogene, and was soon seen in that locality by the watchful Biddle.

Biddle felt himself about to do something which he weakly wished to resist but, somehow, was unable to postpone, for he knew, subconsciously, that it would be a perfectly impossible match. He loved and yet he knew good reasons why he should not love—or, rather, why he should not have allowed himself to go so far. And so, although, the main impulse kept driving him ahead, his mind was turbulent with cross-purposes. It is doubtful, in view of these facts, if he approached the discreetly withdrawing Clarice with a true lover-like hunger in his eye. Instead of an aspiring step and an exalted face, Biddle's jaw was unromantic with honesty.

"I want to talk to you," he said, standing at an

elbow in whose crook the apple-basket was promptly hung. "I can't stand this any longer, Clarice?"

"Yes?" said Clarice, frowning faintly.

"I don't know exactly how to begin," he went on, "but I guess you know how I feel about yesterday."

"Well," said the girl slowly, "do you know, too, how *I* feel about it?"

"I—I—I suppose you do," he answered with difficulty, but failed to say what it was that he supposed.

"I don't know why you should think the things of me that apparently you *have* thought," said Clarice, "but I hope you see now that they're not true."

"I don't know why, either," was the confession. "But I know I feel a great deal differently now. I want to apologize to you, Clarice——"

"Who told you that you might call me Clarice?" she asked with a touch of impatience.

"Why—why, nobody," said Biddle, and paused. He didn't seem to be getting on very fast, and began to feel sick and upset.

Miss Belvawney saw a promising apple on the ground some distance ahead of her and went to

296 THE DESERT AND MRS. AJAX

pick it up. Then she saw another still farther on. Biddle followed with a moody face. Clarice stopped and sighed over the inevitable.

"Well?" said she.

"I guess I'll just say right out what I wanted to say," Biddle continued heavily. "I've been a regular pup about this thing and I guess you know it. But I want to put myself right in your eyes, and more than that I want to say that I like you more than any girl I ever saw. I know very well I didn't feel this way yesterday, but I certainly do now, and the more I see of you the more I know that I'd—well—I'd like to have you for my wife, Miss Belvawney. You're so fine, and strong—and everything—and I admire you—and—and—— I tell you what, Clarice," he hurried on, now well under way, "I do want you terribly, and that's no joke. I can't keep my mind off you. I think about you the whole, livelong time. I know this is a queer way to put it, but I'll go down on my knees to you if you'll think it over. I can be a pretty decent fellow when I try, and I think—I know I could make you happy." He stopped and sighed dismally—for some unknown reason.

The lady also sighed.

"I think you're making a great mistake, Mr.

Warder," said she. "I'm very grateful to you for saying all these nice things, but, somehow, I don't believe we'd get on very well together—do you really think we would? We won't say anything more about yesterday, because I believe you are sorry, but it seems to me that you could find some other girl who would suit you a great deal better——"

"But I don't think so," he interrupted, positive at last. "I love you, Clarice—and I want you to be my wife." He knew her well enough now not to make any misplays, but he had to state what was unquestionably true. "I've got a lot of money, you know, and I could make your life a good deal different from what it is now. I think you'd do splendidly at it——"

"You can stop right there," the girl commanded, dropping her basket and facing him with an angry look. "That's the whole trouble. You know perfectly well that I'm not the sort of girl your other friends are and you admit it when you use those words. If I married you and lived in Philadelphia somebody's teeth would be on edge all the time. Perhaps I could learn to do everything they do, but they would always know where I came from and it would hurt you and would hurt me. That's

298 THE DESERT AND MRS. AJAX

one very good reason, and the other reason is even stronger."

"What is it?" he asked, with a sick feeling. "Don't you think you could like—could love me?"

"No," she said honestly. "I don't believe I ever could."

"Well, that's pretty bad for me," said the boy with a gulp. "I thought perhaps you'd give me a chance." He raised his eyes and studied her face intently. "I guess you love another man."

"Oh, no," stammered Clarice, and turned crimson to prove the truth of her statement. "No. You're *quite* mistaken. But I must go. I can't stay here any longer."

"I guess I see it all," said Biddle disgustedly. "I never had a chance. Well, I'm sorry, Miss Belvawney. I guess I'll go, too. I'm going to take a long walk out on the desert somewhere." He moved away a step, then turned a weakly yearning face. "I'd give you everything I have in the world, but I guess you wouldn't take it, would you, Clarice?"

"No," Clarice answered promptly. "I'm sorry to hurt your feelings, but I certainly would not."

"Well," said Biddle. "Well—good-by," and with his hands deep in his pockets he walked heavily away.

"It seems to me there's a terrible lot of frozen faces around camp this morning," the Strong Woman remarked to the returning Belvawney as she drew hot water for her breakfast dishes. "Grandma Rittenhouse and Amy the Flirt are on the 'outs' about something—the old gentleman's smoked up all his cigars—and the Biddler's lost his merry twinkle entirely. That must have been an awful ride you gave him yesterday."

"It was pretty hot, all right," responded the unperturbed Belvawney, sitting up on the kitchen-table and swinging her feet. "Can't I please make apple pies with you, Boggsey Dear? I'd like to learn to cook."

"Cooks don't wear silk stockings and fancy shoes," Imogene observed pointedly. "Not back in Kansas, anyway."

"My onliest pair," the Belvawney murmured dreamily, and stretched out her slim ankles. "I'm sure I don't know why I put them on to-day."

"Oh, just because you're nutty like the rest of us. But why this haste to be a cook?"

"Well, you s-e-e-e," explained Clarice, draw-

300 THE DESERT AND MRS. AJAX

ing a finger carefully along the table-top. "Who knows but you might be sick—or blown up suddenly in your mine—or something—and *then* where would we be?"

"Yass," mocked Imogene. "Ho-ho-ho!" and she burst into mighty laughter. "I guess *I* know why, Miss Smarty! Oh, ain't you cute—sitting there so meek, a-looking down your nose like a wise little rabbit? 'I want to learn to cook,' says she. 'Perhaps I might have a home of my own some day. Perhaps I might fall in love,' says she. 'Who knows but I might even take it into my little head to get married.' Oh, ho-ho-ho!" Imogene's stentorian laughter rang far down the hallway after the flying girl.

Very pink and dewy-eyed and with the mild tortures of a fear that someone would interrupt delicious self-communion, the woman of the circus which was not, nor now was ever to have been, sped swiftly from the house. Elissus and its fields were calling from their safe retreats. The poignant sweetness of unspoken heart's desire would have not less than solitude for its ineffable hour. Something was singing overhead as she went. Something tinkled under foot. An alamo turned its leaves from green to silver and

back to glistening green again. The smell of ripened fruit rose in a wave of perfume from the sun-warmed earth and seemed like an overtone in the wordless melody that all surrounding life was singing. Wandering alone with her happiness by brook and meadow, she hugged her joy to herself and dreamed out across the sun-bright plain with eyes that glistened though they saw not.

Where was the old life now? Had it really ever been? What had blown it away? And who was this in familiar guise of face and supple figure who thought strange thoughts of Love and Contentment and Growth? She laughed aloud and threw out her arms with their joyous, inclutching gesture. It all seemed so impossible—and so blessed. She had been asleep and now she was awake. Once she had lived in a dulled world of grays and monotonies, yet here were all the royal colors of the spectrum glowing before her eyes.

And so she wandered for her hour, out of sight among the trees, but with the house at no time very distant. Coming at last into control of her thoughts and shameless smilings, she turned back to face the sarcasms of the Strong Woman—with an empty basket.

At a corner of the orchard she stood for a mo-

302 THE DESERT AND MRS. AJAX

ment looking across the fields at the ranch-house. Imogene presently strode forth from the kitchen and hurled several gallons of something into the air with great velocity. Clarice laughed and waved her hand, whereat the Strong Woman responded in wondrous gestures with the dishpan. Then something humorous seemed to occur to Mrs. Ajax and she went through a shameless pantomime that involved much sentimental posing and silent laughter. But the girl had caught sight of another figure and her eyes shifted to where a tall man with a chin and an eye and a down-drooping, tawny mustache leaned indolently against the corral fence, immersed in conversation with the two acrobats.

"I've hardly said a word to him since yesterday. I wonder if Imogene hasn't something that she wants to say to me. I think I'd better go and see right away," and with this mild mis-statement of motives the new shoes went twinkling blithely down the path.

But as the woman of the circus walked towards the house, something which protruded from a clump of bushes and high grass beside the path caught her eye.

It was a very curious thing to be in such a place and position, and she frowned and walked slower.

THE DESERT AND MRS. AJAX 303

A man's boot was projecting into the path, with its toe digging into the ground and its sole upright and facing her. Following the foot farther into the grass, she saw a limb and another foot. As she set her basket down, *the foot moved*.

Something tightened around the woman's heart. Flashing a look towards the house she saw it all as through the falling shutter of a camera—the clean-swept yard, the pans glittering in the sun—a dog yawning on the porch—Imogene walking to her across the fields. In the sudden stillness which seemed to fall around her the sounds of the living, moving things across the pasture lot came to her with a curious distinctness, but the silence of the figure in the covert seemed to carry a presage less of life than of that dread thing which follows it.

For a moment the woman wondered if she were dreaming. Then the foot moved again and an inarticulate sound of anger came to her ears. She could not see the man's face, but his huddled shoulders were full of sinister meaning. As she stared over the crouching head, she saw he was looking at the corral.

And then the significance of the screen, and the position and the death-like silence came home to

304 THE DESERT AND MRS. AJAX

her. Who the man was or what his reasons might be were of no importance in this hideous moment, for something whose octagonal barrel gleamed dully as it wavered slightly from side to side, thrust everything out of her mind except the fact that while the man at the corral amused the other two with his good-natured jokes, Death hovered over him with brushing wings.

There may be infinite periods of time which, to the gods, pass as but moments, but there are, of a certainty, some moments for mortals which seem eternities. To her who now grasped the meaning of it all it seemed as if an æon passed before she could break free from the nightmare that was numbing her. And then—with only a gasping cry wrung from her by her plunge—the woman of the circus threw herself through the air as one dives into water, and fell in a fighting, grappling heap across the unknown's shoulders.

With the rifle flung from his hands the man gave a groan of pain; then twisted himself about to strike at his antagonist. But what feeble blows he could deliver were almost childish compared to the splendid strength which wrenched his hands loose and ground head and shoulders down into the earth under her knee. There was no longer

need to wonder who he was. A mere glimpse of the snarling face, half hidden in the dirt, half strangled by her grip, gave the reason for it all. It was Macklin.

If there had been time to look up in the midst of the struggle, the girl would have seen two things, the first being that Dick Holly had gone into the house without noticing the disturbance, and the second, that Imogene was coming to her across the pasture-lot with incredible speed. But if the Strong Woman imagined there was need of assistance in the astounding struggle which had caught her eye she was mistaken, for the girl had pinioned the man's limbs with her own and was holding him in a vise-like grip from which there could be no escape. Even the pressure on his throat was not relaxed as the seconds passed and his eyes began to start glassily out of a blackening face.

Then a hand worked itself free and tore hopelessly at her wrist.

"Oh, hoh!—you would—would you?" the woman muttered deep in her throat. A sardonic smile parted her lips and she watched the fingers close on her arm in a feeble, useless pull. They were rather long fingers, unbelievably dirty and

306 THE DESERT AND MRS. AJAX

badly gnarled, and in the fraction of time while they closed on her she felt a vivid sensation of disgust. Yet, as she continued to look at the fingers, her own seemed to grow weaker. Little by little her grip began to relax—little by little she took the pressure from his throat. Something was glittering on the hand that plucked at her wrist, and as her eyes stared at it a thought more hideous than all the rest went through her and turned her muscles into ropes of sand.

Imogene was not far away now, filling the air with wild cries and charging furiously through the brush like an angry rhinoceros, but when she burst upon the scene the struggle had been won—and lost again. The man had half risen to his feet while the girl, with a hand thrust out before her face, was shrinking back as if from Death himself. With the promptness which never entirely deserted her the Strong Woman first snatched up the rifle and then struck out with a heavy hand and sent the man sprawling at her feet.

"What in the world's going on here?" she cried, holding her captive down with one hand. "Who's he trying to shoot bullets at?"

"I don't know," the girl shuddered, turning as if to run away. "I stopped him, anyway." She

caught her breath with a gasp and tottered backwards.

"Stop that, Clarice!" snapped Imogene harshly. "Don't you dare faint! What do you mean by catching this fellow and then letting him go again?"

The body under her squirmed around as she spoke, and the man's eyes began to flicker from one face to the other. His mouth was too full of dirt for speech, but his sense of hearing had not been impaired.

The girl shielded her eyes from the sight.

"I don't know," she said again in a strangled voice. "Get up, Imogene. Let him go."

"I'll do nothing of the sort," retorted the Strong Woman. "It seems terrible funny you caught him and beat him nearly to death just to let him go——"

The girl turned back with a half-crazed look on her face which frightened the other woman.

"LET HIM GO!" she cried, clutching at Imogene's arm. "I've got my reason!"

"I think you've lost your reason," was the angry reply.

Then the man on the ground managed to clear his mouth and gutter forth some words.

308 THE DESERT AND MRS. AJAX

"Get up offn me, y'u," he rasped. "Don't y'u see she knows me? That's *Winnie*. THAT'S MY DAUGHTER!"

The words rang strangely in the Strong Woman's ears. Looking up at the girl, she saw her shrink back with loathing in her eyes. Then the Strong Woman rose from off the prostrate form and gave it a hearty kick.

"Get up, then," she said, dragging him into an upright position with the gentle grip of a grizzly bear. "Let's take a look."

"Don't y'u pester me," the man whined. "Winnie! Don't y'u let this crazy woman——"

"CLARICE!" commanded Imogene. "Come here and look at this fellow. Do you mean to say that this dirty old pup——"

"Take a look at it!" the man interrupted, and thrust a grimy ring-finger under Imogene's disgusted nose.

Imogene looked. Then she dropped his arm and gripped the rifle in both hands.

"I'll give you just exactly one minute to get off this property into Hell," said the Strong Woman. "You're no father of this girl and you never will be. And you ain't goin' to stick around here making us poor women cry or shooting things

with bullets, either. There's the road to Moab and you're going to take it on the run. Now,—you—GIT!" And with a heavy swing of the clubbed rifle across his back, she sent the unknown plunging for his life across the fields.

The Lifter of Great Weights turned to the girl, lying face downwards on the grass, and surveyed her with withering scorn. To be entirely truthful, this promised to be a heavier weight to lift than any dumb-bell the Strong Woman had ever essayed, but it was going to be accomplished, just the same.

"Clarice," said she, "you certainly get my goat. How, in the name of Time, you can recognize a father you never saw before beats me all around the block. I guess you're losing your mind."

"I hope I am," sobbed the girl.

"Yes, I hope so, too," was the comforting echo. "Sit up here, now, and answer me criss-cross your heart. Did Papa show you the Family Album while you were fighting?"

"Let me *alone!*" was the protesting moan.

"Thanking you very kindly—I won't," said Imogene. "I'm entirely too interested. I gotta know if it was because he has green eyes that you

310 THE DESERT AND MRS. AJAX

were so glad to recognize him or because there's a strawberry mark in the middle of his back."

"It—it was a *ring*," the girl muttered, blindly thrusting out her hand. "It's just the same as mine."

"Ah! Yess-s-s-s!" was the politely sibilant response. "A dear little ten-cent ring that he picked up in a pawnshop once when he was flush, I reckon. And you're so tickled to death to have a father that you'd take him all on the strength of a little piece of brass that *anyone* could own. Hurry up now and get done with your crying, because I want to tell you what I think of your taste in fathers. I must say that I'm pretty much ashamed of you, young lady. After all your traveling 'round looking at papas, I think you made a mighty bum choice."

The girl's face came into view and she looked up at the other with clearer eyes.

"I wish I could believe you, Imogene," she said mournfully.

"Clarice," said Imogene quietly, as she sat down by the girl and hugged her up in her arms, "there's nothing to it. I just said those things to get you angry and calmed down. Believe me, my dear—there isn't a word of truth either in what he

said or you believe. I advise you to put this thing out of your mind as an absolute impossibility. Don't ever speak to me again about it, or to yourself, or to anyone else. When I think it's necessary for you to have a father, *I'll give you one*," said Imogene.

She studied the girl for a moment, then continued her reflections in a more intimate tone. "I don't see why you're so terrible set on having a father, anyway," said Imogene. "It seems to me I'd rather have a husband any day."

The face was promptly hidden again and there was a mournful sigh. "Impossible," said a voice.

"Nonsense," said the Strong Woman definitely. "Get up now and rub your cheeks. Mr. Holly's been crazy to find you for a half an hour. He's hunting all over for you."

Somewhat comforted but with lowered, unseeing eyes, the girl finally came to the house, devoutly praying for a free passage to her room. But, as Fate intended, they met in the hallway, and before she could escape he threw open the office-door.

"I've got a scheme! Come see it unroll!" he said boyishly, and in spite of her torture she followed in.

312 THE DESERT AND MRS. AJAX

"I don't see why I didn't break into this before!" he said. "Everything's topsy-turvy here—you saw that to-day—and I've been racking my brains for something to amuse these people till it's time for them to go. So I've figured out that what we need here is a Dance!" He waited for her faint smile, then hurried on.

"It won't be hard," he said. "I've been looking at Drybone's new barn and it's just the thing! And we can get an awful crowd. All Moab'll come—they're crazy about such things. And the young engineer! And the assayer from Yellow Dog! And folks from Tuniper! And Ash Flat! And Lonesome Dove! Why—there won't be room for half! Only the Bishop—we'll leave him out. And that's the *first* part. Now, the second part will be a supper. After that will come—**THE PERFORMANCE!**"

"The *what?*"

"The *performance!*" he repeated, astonished. "Why—we couldn't do without *that!* They'd have the time of their lives! Just *think* of all we can do for them. Mike and Harry and Imogene and Cobrita——"

His words rang strangely in her ears. A

troublesome presentiment began to lie heavy on her heart.

"Do you mean you're going to have them in their *acts*?" she said.

"Why, of course," he answered hastily. "Just *see* what a lot there'd be to do. Bareback riding—and tumbling—and Imogene lifting heavy weights—and Cobrita's dogs doing tricks—Altamont dressed up in a turban playing his flute—the Wild Man riding the elephant 'round and 'round and the snakes loose in the audience, scaring the women——"

"And—you—want—me—to—help?" she asked slowly, mechanically.

"I wish you *would*," he said with blind hopefulness. "You haven't done anything like that in a long time, have you?"

"No," she answered. "No. Not in a long time," and a fiery blush spread over her neck and face. She drew back and turned away. A revulsion took possession of her and froze her into white silence. She walked a few steps towards the door, her hands clenched at her sides. Her heart, which had given one stricken leap as she caught his meaning, was beating slowly and laboriously.

And this was what it all had come to! All her

314 THE DESERT AND MRS. AJAX

efforts to rehabilitate herself—all her attempts to shake off the ugly old chrysalis and flutter forth, bright and shining, into what had seemed a beautiful, new world. Only a few days ago she had thought she was succeeding, but now, it seemed as if a mistake had been made somewhere. If she had deceived herself into thinking the butterfly's original state forgotten, it was being impressed on her with rude strength that other people had not yet gone that far.

The girl walked unsteadily away and sank down on a chair, her little world in chaos. One there had been who seemed to understand. One there had been who always stood by and smiled good-naturedly, comprehendingly—with a word, or a gift, or a frank desire for companionship which was better than any gift. And, just as Fate would have it, this was the one who had deliberately come and struck the hardest blow. She lowered her head on her arms and broke into a shudder of tears.

The man started as if he had been shot. His face grew frightened. He came nearer, wondering and perplexed, his hand stretched out in protest.

“Why—Clarice!” he cried in amazement.

"What have I done? What in the world is the trouble? Why, I don't understand this!" he said despairingly. "I've done something, and I don't know what it is. *Please*, don't cry! My heavens!" he groaned to himself. "What's going on here? *You* hurt that little girl? I'd kill you first. Clarice!" he called, and laid a trembling hand on her arm. "Please, don't cry, little girl. I only asked you to *help!*"

"I know," she sobbed. "And that's the worst of it. You asked me—you asked me—oh—oh," she shuddered, and gave it up. "I want to help you—but I can't—I *can't!*"

He stared miserably down at her, appalled at the sight of her grief and yet uncertain as to what to do or think. His hands hovered over, hungering unbelievably to sweep her up into his arms. Then they dropped at his sides, and he retreated.

"I don't know what I've done," he faltered. "But I guess it's something that doesn't make you want to see me any more. I'll go right out—right away." And he strode quickly from the room.

A moment later Imogene, looking up from the last relics of breakfast, beheld a strange sight in the kitchen doorway. The owner of the ranch

316 THE DESERT AND MRS. 'AJAX

was stumbling in on her with staring eyes and wildly waving arms.

"For Heaven's sake, go see what's the matter with Clarice!" he burst out. "She's crying as hard as she can. Something terrible must have happened. My God—if I've said anything to hurt her feelings——"

"What have you been saying to that little girl?" demanded Imogene ferociously, drying her hands on her apron and coming on the run.

"It was about the *performance!*" he said huskily. "I asked her to help, but she can't. Says she *wants* to, but she *can't!* And then she burst right out crying."

Imogene halted abruptly. A light flashed across her face and she had hard work to stifle her laughter.

"Did you ask her to *perform* for you?" she barked with well-feigned anger.

"Why, *no!*" wailed the helpless one. "I only asked her to *help*. I didn't ask her to do any of her act—I didn't think of it—I never *have*. It never seemed to me as if she belonged to the circus like the rest—the thought never occurred to me. If I'd thought she cared that much about it I'd have asked her, too."

THE DESERT AND MRS. AJAX 317

Then a thought flashed through his agitated mind. He stopped. His eyes brightened. He threw up his hands with a comic gesture of disgust.

"I know," he shouted. "What a great big fool I was. She wants to help, but she can't. *She hasn't got any tights!*"

"TIGHTS!" yelled Imogene, frantically backing him up against the door and pinning him fast with her mighty hands. "See here—you great big chump! Did you say anything like that to that child?"

"NO!" he burst forth. "Of course I didn't. I never thought of it. That's what she's mad about."

"IDIOT!" gasped Imogene, shaking him with might and main. "If you say 'tights' to that little girl you'll kill her! Of *course* she hasn't any. She burned 'em up long ago—right here in my stove—with my own eyes watching her. Don't you know what's the matter with her? Haven't you any eyes? Can't you *see*? She's crazy to have you think she's a better kind of a girl than an acrobat! Wake up, man! *She loves you!*"

He strained against her arms.

"Imogene! You're crazy!"

318 THE DESERT AND MRS. AJAX

"No. I'm *not* crazy!" shouted the Strong Woman; "but I'll be mad enough to pound you in another minute. Now answer me straight and true. You didn't say anything about trapezes—or tights—or anything?"

"No. Not a word," he howled, frantic with shame over his awful error.

"HURRAH!" cried Imogene, backing away to give him room for action. "Now—*get out of here!* RUN! JUMP! GIT! CLEAR OUT! Go to her just as fast as Heaven will let you. Get down on your knees and pray to God to make her forgive you for not staying there in the first place. IF YOU DON'T ASK HER TO MARRY YOU IN TWO MINUTES BY THE CLOCK, I'LL BREAK YOUR NECK."

"Imogene," he faltered piteously, "you wouldn't fool me?"

"GET OUT OF HERE," said Imogene violently, and catapulted him down the hallway. "You men make me tired. I'd like to throw you out of my house!"

He paused to ask one more timid question, but saw it would be futile. The door slammed in his face.

He stared wildly about with convulsive move-

ments, and took a deep breath. Then he turned and ran madly down the hall.

Out in the kitchen the Strong Woman, true to her threat, kept a watchful eye on the clock. The fateful two minutes passed, and anon, another two. With five long minutes safely folded to the bosom of the past, a soft radiance spread its glow across Imogene's moon-like countenance. Her body began to sway rhythmically from side to side, and a humming sound of wondrous volume filled the kitchen. With skirt nipped daintily twixt thumb and finger, her feet began to glide about in an old-fashioned dance-step, while strange fragments not unlike "The Beautiful Blue Danube" assaulted the air. "Tra-la-la-la. Ki-yi! Ki-yi!" pæaned Imogene, and spun like a whirling dervish. In and out between stove and table, with only her pots and pans for audience, the Lifter of Great Weights was violently waltzing out her joy all by herself.

Intruding delicately upon these strange exercises, the Wild Man from Java was presently felt to be near at hand. Not unaverse to being considered graceful in her old age, Imogene kept up an artificial unconsciousness among her pirouettes until stopped by a suggestion from the Wild Man.

320 THE DESERT AND MRS. AJAX

"S-s-s-s-s-t!" said the Wild Man forcibly.
"Cut that out. *She's a-coming!*"

"Who's a-coming?" demanded the joyful one.

"Grandma," answered the Wild Man, with knowing succinctness, and vanished away.

"I thought I'd come around for a little visit," Mrs. Warder said genially, as she stood on the doorstep. "I hope you're not too busy."

"Not at all," Imogene answered preoccupiedly, and finally looked up from where she sat at her kitchen-table. The table-drawer stood open and numerous documents were scattered about. In her hand she held a square, blue sheet headed, "American Smelting and Refining Company."

"Come right in," the Strong Woman said. "I don't mind telling you that I *have* been real busy, but it's mostly done now. I've been making up accounts on my mine and sort of looking things over. Sometimes I think it's most too big a thing for a poor weak woman like me to tackle."

Imogene thrust the papers to one side with a weary movement and leaned her head pensively on her hand. "Of course, it's awful nice to get gold out of," she said, "but the worry of bossing those men is something terrible. If it wasn't that I've got a good thing close by I believe—I believe——"

THE DESERT AND MRS. AJAX 321

Imogene's voice faded gently away, leaving her beliefs still in the shadow.

"You say you've taken some gold out of it already?" Mrs. Warder asked, speaking in a reflectful tone and sitting down as if she meant to stay.

"Yep," said Imogene with a yawn. "Want to see some of the returns? There's Shipment Number Three Hundred and Fifteen B."

Mrs. Warder put on her glasses and breathed heavily over the report.

"I believe I'll get busy and buy me a couple of new silk dresses," remarked Imogene dreamily. "I might have to run down to San Francisco shortly on some matters connected with this property and——"

"One hundred and sixty-five dollars—I understand that much of it, anyway," the Philadelphian said with a shrewd light in her eye. "Did *you* make a hundred and sixty-five dollars?"

"Yeh-up. But about those dresses—I don't know just where to have 'em made up. Ain't there some good dressmakers in Philadelphia who could give me a fit? I know I'm dreadful partickeler, but——"

Mrs. Warder laid the sheet down and surveyed

the other calculatively. "Eh?" she murmured. "Oh, *dresses*. Why, yes—to be sure. But suppose you tell me something more about the mine."

"Oh—the *mine*? Well—it's all there," said Imogene. "It's a nice mine, too."

"You're *sure* it's a nice little mine?" queried the other carefully. "You think there's money in it, do you?"

"I *know* there's money in it," the Strong Woman stated fearlessly. "You never saw a mine yet as big as that one but it had money in it—somewhere. Sure it's a nice mine. Didn't I dig the ore out of the vein and wash the gold out for you? You didn't lose the little bag or tell anybody, did you?"

"Oh, no. I've got it all locked up," and Mrs. Warder fidgeted with her porte-monnaie. "If I were only *sure*," she whispered to herself.

"As I was saying—about those dresses," remarked Imogene. "This trip to the city would come in mighty handy for that. I've been expecting to make arrangements regarding this little mine with a certain party for some time past, but on the other hand, if you really want to have the first chance at picking up a bargain——" The

Strong Woman sat back and drummed thoughtfully on the table.

"Hummmm," she said with a heavy frown. "Well, now. I tell you what. I like you a whole lot for coming to me with this idea and, maybe, if you want to talk business, let's us figure out just what we can do. Let's get down to real *business*."

"Yes, yes. We must make this real *business*," was the fidgety reply, and Mrs. Warder hitched her chair closer and brought the porte-monnaie into view. "That's just what I've been thinking about all night long, dear Mrs. Boggs. I didn't know how you'd feel about it—Dear. You don't mind if I call you 'Dear.'"

"I hope I will be dear," purred Imogene. "Now, how much money do you really think you could——"

It is regrettable that the remainder of this conversation, being of a strictly business nature, cannot be disclosed. All that is known concerning it proves that it was carried on in low tones, and not even the discreet Wild Man, lurking around the doorway, could detect more than a faint murmur. But the Wild Man soon made his own deductions, for when Warder senior, casting about for his wife, approached too close to Imogene's

324 THE DESERT AND MRS. AJAX

stronghold, the Wild Man, oh, wonder of wonders! shook his head and pointed in the other direction.

Mr. Warder thought of the office and concluded that he would proceed thither. The door was shut. But unless a door is locked as well as shut it may often be opened by turning the knob and pushing vigorously until the weight sometimes found to be leaning against it——

“Why, bless my soul!” gasped Mr. Warder. He took a short moment in which to assure himself that it was not an optical illusion, and then assaulted his partner. “You old scamp! Have you been in love all this time and never told me?”

He held the incoherent two fast and grew red with laughter. “There, now, Clarice—I’ll let you go—but I’ve had the very last squeeze you can ever give away.”

“You were looking for me?” asked Holly.

“Yes. I have a wire here from San Francisco. I promised to meet a man there who’s coming up from Mexico, and he’s caught a steamer a week ahead of time. Can you get us off right now?” Warder’s hand was on the knob and he was turning away.

As he did so there came a sound of steps and tinkling spurs in the hallway. Someone rapped and then opened the door. A man whom none but the ranchman knew stood on the threshold.

At sight of a woman, the stranger removed his hat, but without further greeting than a nod to the man who had despatched him on his quest two weeks before, the drill-runner proceeded to make his report.

"I've been looking up this man Macklin as you told me to do," said the drill-runner with a calm eye, "and I reckon you've wasted your money, Boss. He hasn't left any more trail than a fly on a rock. Howsomever, he's ketched all right—Jake Johnson put the nippers on him down on the Moab road not ten minutes ago."

Holly nodded silently, as if he were not surprised to find that the man had survived, after all. He glanced quickly at the girl beside him for the look of relief which he felt sure would show in her face, and so looking, saw a curious change, take place.

"But while I was checking up Macklin," the drill-runner continued, "I found out a funny thing about Danny Drew that we never knew before. Maybe you'd like to know about it. This yere

326 THE DESERT AND MRS. AJAX

Drew man's name wasn't 'Drew' at all," said the drill-runner. "'Twas *Henry Balderson!*"

There was a little pause after the drill-runner ceased speaking, and then the woman's eyes began to light up with astonishment. Wider and wider they opened, and she stepped back with an exclamation. Some wonderful hope was shining in her face and crystallizing behind her eyes. Doubts were being swept away and misconceptions put under foot forever. The certainty of Truth was filling her with a force which flashed an understanding into Dick Holly's mind long before she spoke. The worst had been for Clarice, and it would never come again. The best was here now.

"Why—that's *my* name!" the girl whispered. "*I'm Winnie Balderson!*"

Ten minutes later the tactful Mr. Warder noisily approached the front of the house by way of the kitchen, where he had been chumming with Imogene, and found Holly alone. Mr. Warder silently exhibited something which he was carrying with a certain amount of timidity.

"That rifle," he said significantly, "was found a few minutes ago in a patch of grass about a hundred yards in a bee-line from the corral where, I

think you will remember, you were standing at about that time. From what Imogene tells me, I believe I'm not putting it too strongly when I say that Mr. Richard Holly owes Miss Belvawney-Balderson a great deal more than his share of the Atlas Mine, which he is now preparing to swindle me out of—by marriage. Dick! That girl saved your life to-day, and you never knew it!"

The ranchman looked ruefully at the dirtied rifle, and put out a hand as if to thrust back the image of that death which had hovered over him and been denied.

"She began to save it quite a while ago," he said.

It was characteristic of the Philadelphians that, with their marching orders once issued, they prepared for departure with commendable directness.

"We leave in half an hour, Amy!" Mrs. War-der called, as she hurried up the stairs to her room. "Find someone to send for Biddle. Your uncle mustn't miss his train."

But Biddle was already in sight, walking in from nowhere in particular, with a frown on his good-looking face.

"Uh-huh," said Biddle. "I'll be ready, don't

328 THE DESERT AND MRS. AJAX

you fret. I'm all packed now. But San Francisco won't see much of me, let me state. I'm going down to Burlingame and get in some polo. Monty Dupignac and the Remsen boys have been writing to me for a week." And in order to be quite sure that he was not left behind, Biddle carried his trunk downstairs in his arms and seated himself on it, on the porch. Overhead were sounds of feet moving hurriedly about and Clarice and Amy laughing over the rush of packing. People passed and repassed him—Mike and Harry, and Drybone getting his teams out of the corral and hitching up—Cobrita, with the smallest of her dogs under her arm, tripping by with a smile into the house. The telephone-bell tinkled after a time, and he answered it. He wrote out the telegram carefully and read it through twice. Then he opened his mouth in silent amazement. For a moment his eye dwelt calculatively on the quotation sheet on the wall, but he soon shook his head disgustedly and went back to his seat on the trunk.

Clarice appeared in the doorway, and Biddle rose and bowed.

"I'm sorry everyone's going away," the girl said, straightforwardly. "It's been very nice, hasn't it?"

"I guess it will be pleasanter when we're gone," he said, with a faint smile.

"You speak as if we'd never meet again."

"Shall we?" he asked doubtfully.

"I don't see why not," was the honest answer.

"I don't know any reason why I shouldn't be pleasant to you, or you to me."

"It would never be hard work for *me*," he said unsteadily. "But I can see now that it would be useless to expect anything more than that on *your* part. However, if you're going to marry Holly you're in luck," said Biddle frankly. "He's a corker. He's all right. And Amy seems to be up to something, too. Somebody named 'David' has made a pot of money."

"WHAT'S THAT?" gasped Amy, appearing on the scene in her traveling dress. "Don't tell me it really went *through*!"

"Something did," laughed Biddle, for the first time. "According to to-day's market, your 'David' boy is about five thousand ahead of the game."

"I'm going to faint, Clarice, I *know* I am," cried Amy, with a convincing scream. "Support me whilst I swoon. David has actually made some money at last!"

330 THE DESERT AND MRS. AJAX

The wagons, with Drybone and the Wild Man, drew up in front of the house. While the trunks were being loaded on, Mrs. Warder, fully accoutred, came down the stairs and those who were going away and those who were to stay, began to say good-by.

"But what shall I do with the dog, Cobrita?" Amy was saying to the Snake Lady, who seemed quite tearful over the loss of so helpful a hand at *trousseau*-making. "You're just a dear to give me the trickiest one. How shall I treat it? I never had a dog, or anything."

"Just feed it, I guess," said Cobrita with a gulp. "And write to me next month as 'Mrs. Harry Doogan.' That's all I want."

Imogene and Mrs. Warder exchanged a few low-toned words, but were interrupted by Altamont, who seemed quite excited over something and very bright.

"When you are home again in Philadelphia," the little man said, and there was a sudden silence, "I hope a sight of the old Friends' Meeting House down in Washington Square will remind you pleasantly of us. I used to live right next door when I was a little boy."

"YOU!" gasped Mrs. Warder, while they

listened in amazement. "*You lived in Philadelphia?*"

"Oh, dear, yes," said the little man mildly. "*Our family always lived there. They were 'Friends,' you know—ever since Robert Morris's time.*"

The lady looked at him in a frightened way for a moment, but nothing but truth, long concealed, but none the less veracious, beamed in the little man's eye.

"And where did *your* ancestors live?" he asked gently.

Mrs. Warder, in her bewilderment, was as clay in the hands of the potter.

"On Wood Street," was the fatal answer.

"Ah! Yes," said Altamont distantly, with entire appreciation of the import of the disclosure. "*In that case we can hardly expect them to have met.*"

Once more the Inter-Continentalers and Trans-Oceanicers were gathered at the dinner-table. In the course of re-arrangement made necessary by the departures they took their seats, or other people's seats, with rare uncertainty and so were not sur-

332 THE DESERT AND MRS. AJAX

prised, on looking down the long expanse of table, to see a little man with straw-colored eyebrows peering brightly at them over the top of the soup tureen.

The little man looked rejuvenated. His hair was no longer tufty. His collar, for once, was fastened securely in the back. The faintly puzzled light in his eye had given way to a beaming certainty, while an entire comprehension of all that was going on about him showed in his smiling face.

"Well, children," announced Imogene, marching in with the roast, "it looks as if the days of the old circus were about over. Do I hear any complaints?"

The circus nodded abstractedly. The days of wandering, in truth, were past. Each one felt within himself or herself the deeply-rooted conviction that he or she was going to remain where he or she was for as long as was humanly possible. Then their minds flitted easily to other diversions. Only Altamont spoke, and at his first words Holly felt Clarice's hand grasp his with a startled movement.

"In spite of the hard times life has held for us so far, I cannot but think that it has all been

worth while," he was saying gently. "Perhaps the hardships have not developed as much in myself as in the others, as I can see only too plainly, but still——" The little man stopped and choked.

"Please, Altamont—no more now," said Imogene, with a quick breath. "We're going to take a little trip—you and me. We're going down to see a wise man who can fix us all up. We're going to be better now, and not have any more headaches."

"Yes," said the little man, with truth. "I'm going to be better soon. I can feel it."

"Going *away*, Imogene?" came the dismayed chorus.

"Oh—just to San Francisco," announced that lady with a nonchalant wave of her hand. "Don't worry, chilluns. I'll be back. We're just going to run down on a little honeymoon flyer, Altamont and me, because—after a good many years of hard work and hard knocks—*we've hit the pay streak at last.*"

Without waiting for the clamor of inquiry, the Strong Woman tossed her napkin aside and, rising to her feet, whisked a piece of paper out of her pocket.

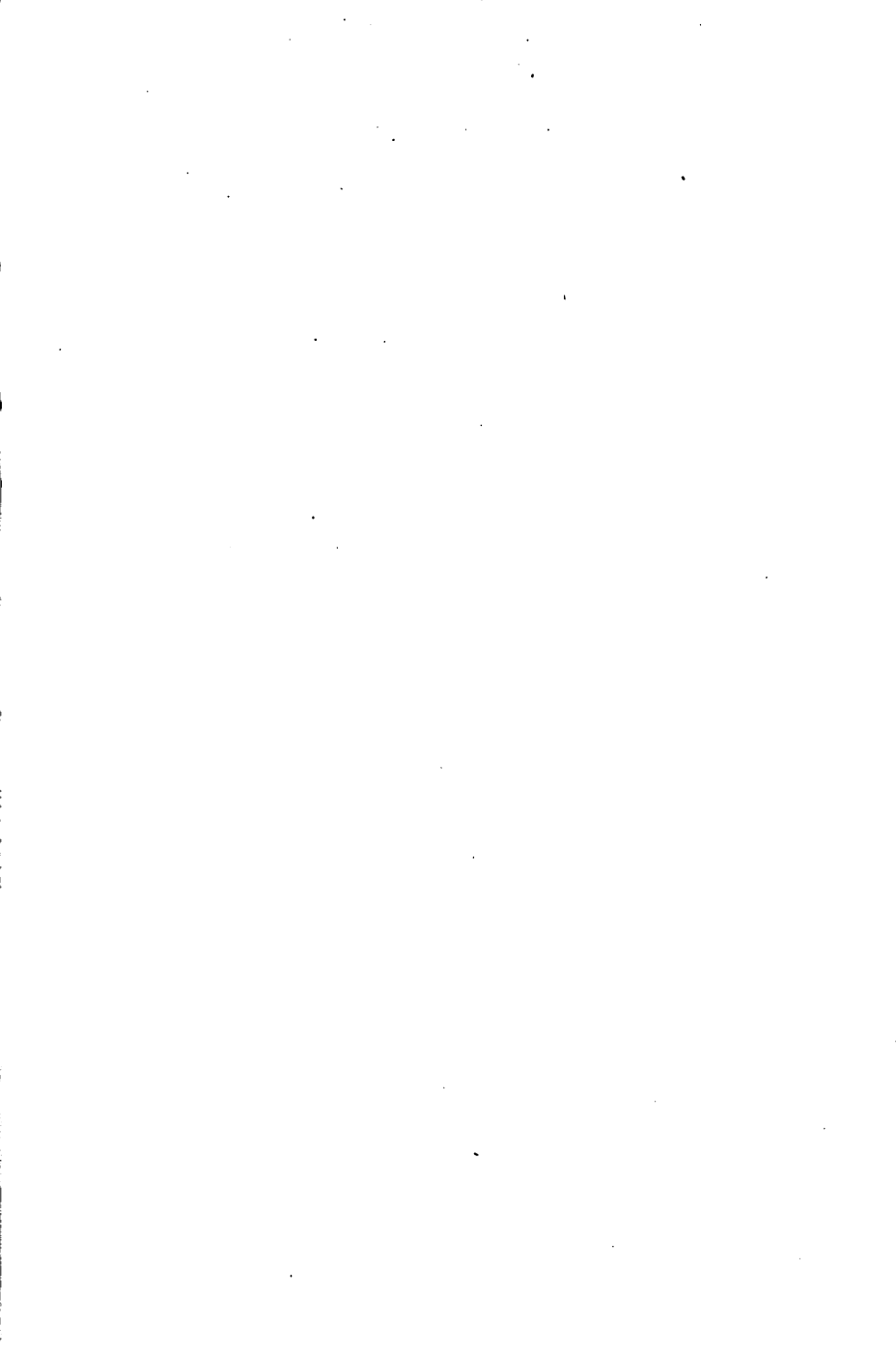
"OH, YOU HARRY-AND-MIKE!" she

334 THE DESERT AND MRS. AJAX

cried exultantly, while she waved a check before their astounded eyes. "You'll have to go some *now* with your million-dollar chicken crops and your fancy pigs if you want to catch old Imogene, even if she *did* have to mark it down from five thousand dollars to forty-nine-ninety, 'cause I'VE—SOLD—MY—MINE!"

Into the momentary silence there came a little squeak of excitement from Altamont, followed by a mighty shout. And then, while chaos reigned, the discomfited Equestrian Twins fell deftly from their chairs and rolled about upon the floor.

FINIS



FOURTEEN DAY USE
RETURN TO DESK FROM WHICH BORROWED

This book is due on the last date stamped below, or
on the date to which renewed.

Renewed books are subject to immediate recall.

2 Jun '55 DS

MAY 31 1955 LU

LD 21-100m-2,'55
(B139s22)476

General Library
University of California
Berkeley

YB 33460

M532957

961

M6952

de

